THE BOYS of COLUMBIA HIGH on the DIAMOND

by

GRAHAM B. FORBES

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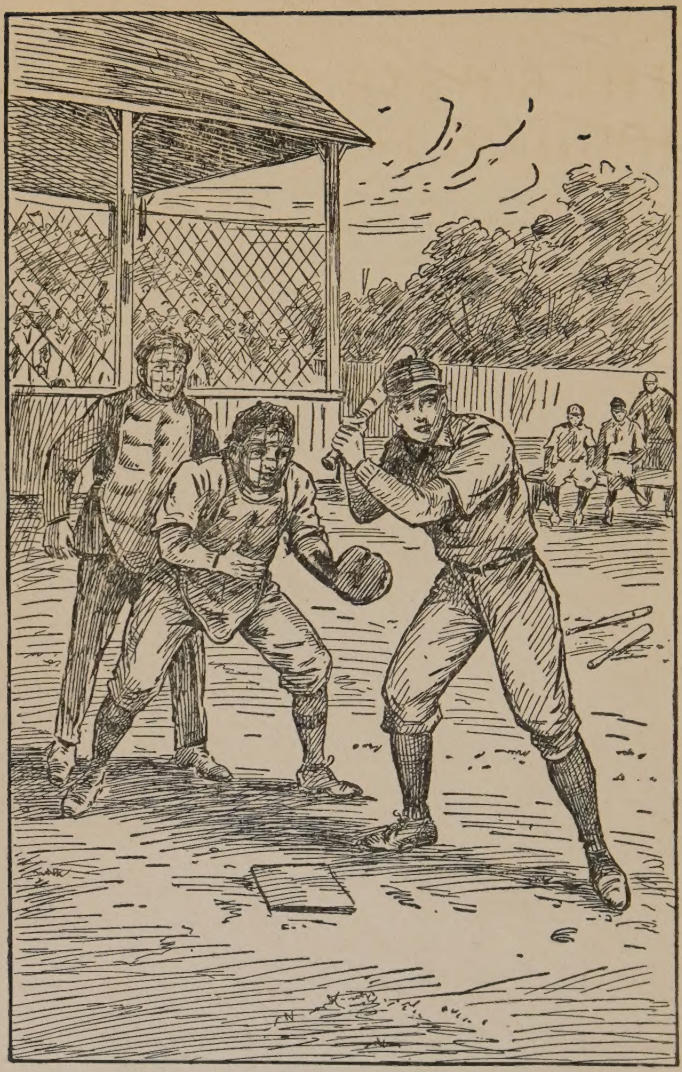

FRANK GAVE NO SIGN OF THE EXCITEMENT THAT THRILLED HIS EVERY NERVE.—*Frontispiece.*

Columbia High on the Diamond. *Page* 32.

THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH ON THE DIAMOND

OR

Out for the Hockey Championship

BY

GRAHAM B. FORBES

AUTHOR OF "THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH," "THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH ON THE DIAMOND," ETC.

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BY GRAHAM B. FORBES

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THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH
Or The All Around Rivals of the School

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Or Winning Out by Pluck

THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH ON THE RIVER
Or The Boat Race Plot That Failed

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Or Out for the Hockey Championship

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The Boys of Columbia High on the Diamond

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THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH ON THE DIAMOND

CHAPTER I

ON THE WAY TO THE GAME

"Give it again, fellows! For the honor of old Columbia—now, once more, with a will!" shouted the cheer captain, Herman Hooker.

"Ho! ho! ho! hi! hi! hi! *veni, vidi, vici!* Columbia!"

"Cast off there, somebody."

"Start your engine, Frank, old boy!"

"Hurrah! we're afloat on the raging Harrapin at last!"

"Got any life preservers aboard, fellows?"

Amid all this uproar and confusion Frank Allen, cool and collected, gave a whirl to the crank to turn his engine over; and immediately a succession of rattling reports testified to the fact that as master of ceremonies he had given the expedition a good send-off.

Then he handed over the engine to the charge of Abner Gould, the man employed regularly by Commodore Adams, to whom the launch belonged.

The *Geraldine* had been loaned to the members of the Columbia High School baseball team for this special occasion, by the owner, just then away on business.

Accompanied by several members of the Columbia band, they were now on their way down the Harrapin river, to play their first game with the Bellport High School nine, and enthusiasm waxed furious over the prospect ahead.

A peculiar condition of the weather had sadly disarranged the schedule of the Harrapin River League. Three clubs composed the organization, representing Bellport, Clifford and Columbia; and it had been agreed that each was to play a trio of games with both opposing teams. The one who came out ahead would, of course, be given the pennant, and hailed as the champion for the year, an honor greatly coveted, since the three towns were keen rivals in all athletic matters.

While Columbia and Bellport had each played three games thus far, they had all been with the third member of the league, Clifford.

What seemed still more singular was the fact that in each of these series Clifford had won one game and lost two. Consequently, Columbia and Bell-

port were now *tied for first place,* with three games to be played, while Clifford was out of the race completely.

To-day was to see the first game between these two giants. And the choice of ground had fallen upon Bellport.

As this enterprising town lay quite a number of miles down the river, it had been suggested that the Columbia nine journey that way by means of Commodore Adams' launch, which, with the services of his man, had been gladly offered for the day.

Of course the two towns were connected by a trolley, owned principally by the father of Lef Seller, a junior in the school, and just now in bad odor on account of some pranks he had played a short time before. Special cars had been brought into use on this gala day to accommodate the crowds desiring to witness the struggle that must accompany the first meeting of the rival nines.

With the flags of the Harrapin River Boat Club floating from stem and stern, and the band tooting away gaily, the little launch left the float, and started merrily down-stream.

A roar from the crowd on the bank testified to the fact that, while all Columbia could not journey over to Bellport to witness this impending game, the sympathies of those compelled to remain at home

were with the boys who represented the honor of the High School on this occasion.

"Say, this is what I call going to battle in style," said Lanky Wallace, the tall first baseman, as he shoved alongside Frank on the crowded seat, and threw an arm around the other with the air of a chum.

"I was just speculating on how we will return—with shouts and cheers, or dolefully telling each other just how it happened," remarked Frank; but his smiling face was evidence of the fact that he had little fears on that score as he looked around at the enthusiastic countenances of his comrades.

"If your arm's in prime condition, as you say, I'm not worrying any on that score, Frank. Coddling may be a wonder, just as they claim, but once we get on to his curves there's going to be some smashing work done. I feel that I'm in for business at the old stand myself, to-day," returned Lanky, with a positive shake of his head.

"Glad to hear you say it. A pitcher needs confidence in the ability of his men to get runs, as well as field like a machine. We've just *got* to do that crowd up to-day, and that's all there is to it."

"And we will, never fear, Frank," observed Roderic Seymour, who, leading senior though he was, considered it an honor to serve as captain, and play

second with the snappy nine Columbia had put into the field this year.

"Are we on time?" demanded Buster Billings, always afraid of getting left, although worrying did not seem to reduce his abundant flesh so that it could be noticed.

"Yes, with a margin to spare, if the boat shoves along as she is doing right now," replied Lanky Wallace.

Lanky, of course, covered first, and few balls ever passed through his territory when he was feeling fit.

Lef Seller was aboard the boat, since he was a member of the team, though under a cloud temporarily, and forbidden by the faculty from taking part in any baseball game during the season. This severe punishment sprung from his action in playing an unusually mean prank upon Frank, whom he chose to regard as his mortal enemy; and which circumstance, together with many other interesting events, has been set forth in full in the preceding volume of this series, called: "The Boys of Columbia High; or, The All Around Rivals of the School."

Lef tried to join with his mates and appear jolly, but it was a great effort, when his heart was sore on account of being listed as the black sheep of the flock, to be shunned by self-respecting fellows.

He had his own followers, who toadied to him on account of the money he spent so freely; but

none of them happened to be aboard the boat, so Lef felt that he was in one sense out of his element.

The beautiful home town faded out of sight up the river, and all eyes began to be turned toward the bow, as they anticipated catching a distant glimpse of Bellport at any moment.

"Better save your wind until later, Herman!" called out Tom Budd, the lithe shortstop, and a fellow who was a natural acrobat, doing stunts in and out of season; so that no one was ever surprised to see him spring into the air, catch a liner, turn completely over, and come up smiling, with the ball held up for the umpire to take notice.

"Plenty more left," laughed the "best yeller Columbia ever had," as he waved his megaphone in the air, and led the boys in another song.

It was a glorious day in June, and not one aboard that boat but felt the inspiration of the magical sunshine and soft air.

Half of the distance separating the rival towns had been covered by this time, and the gallant little launch was making fine speed down the current.

"Looks like Clifford meant to be represented at the game, too," remarked one of the boys, pointing to the shore.

Clifford was above Columbia, and on the other bank of the river. A road led down to the vicinity

of Bellport, where a ferry took farm wagons across. And on this road a cloud of dust told that all sorts of vehicles had been impressed into service to carry the baseball-mad people to the scene.

Fine cars shot along, blowing their horns, and steady-going farm horses trotted evenly by the side of the road, all heading in the one direction. It was enough to thrill the boys belonging to the team to realize that all this excitement in the county was caused by their crossing bats with the Bellport High nine.

"Poor old Clifford never got a peep in this year," mocked Jack Comfort, said to be the best chaser after flies the school had ever known, and who guarded center field.

"Well, they had hard luck. The game they won from us showed that there was cracking good stuff on the team. I never saw a better game in my life, with the score tied in the ninth. Wow! that was some exciting!" exclaimed Lanky, his eyes sparkling at the recollection.

"It would have been our game if Ben Allison could have held that fly out in left. He made a big effort, but dropped the ball," remarked Captain Seymour, sadly.

"Well, I reckon that failure just knocked poor Ben out. He's been no good to the team ever since, and here we have to put our extra pitcher in right

garden just to fill in, because he's a crackerjack pinch hitter!" grumbled Buster.

"That's all right, boys, and I'm only too glad of the chance to play at all. A freshman doesn't often get on the team, and it's mighty fine for you to boost me up this way," Ralph West hastened to remark.

Ralph did not live in Columbia, being one of the pay students. He was anxious for an education, and a fortunate chance had allowed him to come to the thriving river town at the beginning of the school year. He and Frank had become good friends, and the latter was deeply interested in certain strange features connected with Ralph's fortunes.

"I think it's a poor rule that keeps freshmen off the team so much. They are better fitted to take part in sports then than later on, when filled with ambition to excel in their studies," said Jack Eastwick, one of the juniors, and a substitute on the team.

At this there was a universal howl, for Jack was notoriously averse to studying under any and all circumstances, and depended upon a system of "cramming" just before examinations to carry him through.

"Now, there's a wide difference of opinion on that question. For my part, I fully agree with Coach Willoughby, who says——" but Buster was

seldom allowed to tell what this wonderful instructor, whom the boys really believed existed only in the imagination of the fat right fielder, had to say.

As usual, a shout cut him short, and with an injured stare at the laughing group, he relapsed into disdainful silence.

"Where are their grounds located?" asked Ralph, who had never as yet had an opportunity for visiting the Bellport field.

"Half a mile below the town. Bellport is something of a manufacturing place, and there's going to be more or less of a rough element at the game, for the factories have shut down for a half holiday, beginning this Saturday, and the hands are sure to be out in force."

Frank looked a trifle anxious as he spoke, for truth to tell he had more than once wondered whether a sense of fairness would animate that rough element, or the desire to see Bellport win at any cost.

"Listen! I thought I heard a roar just then. The wind is coming up the river, and it must have been shouts from the ball field," and Seymour held up his hand to ask for silence.

It was while they were thus straining their ears to catch the sounds from below that all at once the familiar "pop-pop" of the exhaust connected with

the motor boat ceased, and soon their rapid progress fell off.

Immediately everybody started to shout at once, wanting to know what had gone wrong. Frank sprang over to where Abner Gould bent over the little motor. The man lifted a troubled face toward him.

Every eye was glued on Frank as he started to examine the engine, for they knew he had more of a practical knowledge of such things than any one aboard, unless it might be the man hired by Commodore Adams to run his launch.

"What ails the thing, Frank?" demanded Buster, as the other raised up.

"Yes, this isn't the time for playing pranks. We're nearly due now on the field, and don't want to be called shirks!" exclaimed Lanky, warmly.

"Boys, I've got some bad news for you," announced Frank.

"What is it? Don't keep us in suspense, old warhorse!" cried "Bones" Shadduck, who played third on the team.

"The motor has broken down, and we're in a bad box!" declared Frank, seriously.

CHAPTER II

A WARM BEGINNING FOR CODDLING

A GROAN went up from full twenty throats, at this dismal announcement.

"What shall we do? We can't just float down like this. It would look as if we were whipped before we began to play!" sang out Jack Comfort, almost in a whine.

"We've just got to swim for it, that's all! Me for the cool drink!" said Lanky, pretending to poise on the bow of the boat as if for a plunge.

Frank looked serious indeed, but it was something more than the fact of the breakdown that worried him. He had reason for suspecting that Abner Gould must have done something to bring about this condition of affairs!

Still, he said nothing about it, not being sure. But he could not help remembering that this man had a brother who was known as something of a sport, and made himself conspicuous at many of the baseball games by his disposition to bet upon the result,

something that the faculty of the several schools very much objected to, though unable to stop fully.

Dimly Frank could see how there might be some connection between this circumstance and their sudden delay. If Watkins Gould had been wagering heavily against the Columbia team winning, everything that helped disconcert them, and make them unduly anxious, was to his credit. And Abner did not have a face that Frank thought could be trusted.

"Don't worry, boys," he said, as the others crowded around, "there are more ways than one for getting to Bellport. If necessary we could go ashore and take the trolley."

"You might if they let us climb on the roof, for every car is loaded down with people," observed Paul Bird, Frank's chum and catcher.

"All right. Here comes Mr. Garabrant in his launch. Possibly he may be glad to give us a tow."

Frank, as he spoke, kept his eyes on the face of the man who had charge of the motor. He felt positive he saw a sudden look of keen disappointment come upon it, though Abner, upon noticing that he was being observed, tried to look pleased.

"He did it, I'm dead certain!" was what Frank was saying to himself, as a thrill of indignation passed over his frame.

He could stand honest defeat, but when trickery was brought into play it made him angry. At the

same time he did not dream for a moment that any one on the opposing team could have had a hand in this mess.

Herman Hooker immediately got his megaphone into service.

"Ahoy there, Mr. Garrabrant! Will you kindly head this way?" he shouted.

The other launch immediately changed its course and approached. There was quite a little company aboard, and evidently the party was headed for the athletic field of Bellport, to witness the great game.

"What's wrong here?" asked the gentlemanly owner, as he stood up, the better to see.

"A breakdown, and we have really no time to monkey with repairs. Could you give us a tow, sir?" asked Frank.

"Only too glad, boys. It's very evident that unless I do there would be small chance for a game today. Hand us a painter, and we'll make fast to a cleat at our stern," replied the Columbia business man, readily.

This being quickly adjusted, progress was once more resumed. Perhaps they did not move quite so fast as before, but that was a matter of small moment. Once more the cheer captain led in vigorous shouts that rang over the water, and brought answering cries from either shore.

"There's Bellport!" said Frank, directing the at-

tention of Ralph to the numerous tall chimneys that marked the manufacturing town; but they were belching out no smoke this afternoon, for the plants lay idle, with the vast majority of the busy workers in holiday attire heading toward the athletic field.

A landing was made, and jumping ashore, the boys gathered their material of war, after which the march was taken up for the scene of battle.

And when they turned a bend in the road, with the fine field spread before them, every fellow was thrilled to note the tremendous throng that had gathered to see the game, and shout for their respective team.

"Whew! where did they all come from?" gasped Lanky, as he gaped at the host of waving handkerchiefs and hats that greeted their arrival.

"The whole country is baseball mad, that's what," remarked Paul, as he strode along at the side of the pitcher.

"It's a grand sight, and ought to spur every fellow to doing his level best," remarked the other, drawing in a big breath, for he had never before known such a gathering to greet the Columbia High team, at home or abroad.

As usual, some of the boys began to pass balls as they moved across the diamond. This was done to wear away any nervousness that the sight of the immense crowd might have aroused.

The Bellport team had been practicing for some time now, and were ready to give up the diamond to the visitors. As the time for the commencement of the game was not far away, Captain Seymour sent his men out, and started Frank to warming up.

The grandstand fairly swarmed with people, and the bleachers were packed. Indeed, ropes had to be used to keep the crowd off the diamond, and hundreds sat beyond the right field, where there happened to be some shade.

It sounded like Bedlam broke loose, what with the various school yells, the cat-calls and shouts, and now and then a song breaking above the clamor. Herman Hooker had hurried over to where his shouting clan awaited him. They had kept a seat for him in the front row, where he could jump up at the proper time, and lead the cheering with that astounding foghorn voice of his.

Frank noticed as he passed the ball in to Paul that Watkins Gould was present, and apparently boldly seeking bets on the game. The bleachers were occupied for the most part with the factory workers, a rough crowd, and many of them ready to take a chance on their favorite team.

When finally the Columbia boys came in after a strenuous practice covering about a quarter of an hour, the many-colored flags fluttered from the hands of those in the grandstand until the structure looked

like a great bunch of flowers; while from hundreds of lusty throats rose the various class and school cries, blending in a surge of sound.

Then Bellport took the field, their going out being the signal for a tremendous ovation, for they had the full support of their town.

Roderic Seymour had changed the batting list somewhat since the last game played with Clifford. To Ralph was given the honor of leading off, since he was playing in place of Ben Allison. The order ran in this fashion:

Ralph West—Left field.
"Bones" Shaddock—Third base.
Jack Comfort—Center field.
Lanky Wallace—First base.
Buster Billings—Right field.
Tom Budd—Shortstop.
Roderic Seymour—Second base.
Paul Bird—Catcher.
Frank Allen—Pitcher.

Ralph was a fair batter, but a better waiter. For this latter reason he had been given orders to take his time, and as he faced the opposing pitcher, Coddling, who was said to be the best twirler Bellport had ever turned out, he assumed a position of eagerness and expectancy, as though burning with anxiety to strike.

Coddling had never played against any of these fellows before. He was therefore forced to depend entirely on what his catcher signaled. And Clay, while on the team the preceding year, knew nothing about the weaknesses of this new batter.

Consequently Ralph got his base, after two strikes had been called on him, one of which was really a miss at an outcurve.

Of course the excitement began at once. A hum went around the field, and Columbia stock arose, with mocking cries hurled at the local adherents.

Shaddock was a good hitter as rule. He had made something of a record on the team the preceding year. The best he could do now, after knocking three fouls, was to send one into the hands of the shortstop, who failed, however, to double Ralph at second on account of a fumble.

Intense interest was taken in the coming to bat of Jack Comfort.

"Lace one out, old boy!" howled the Columbia bunch in the center of the bleachers, where they had gathered to fairly split the atmosphere with their shouts.

"You can do it if you try! Over Lacy's head, Jack!"

Jack thereupon did try. Three times he swung on the ball, and as often it came with a dull, sickening thud in the catcher's big mitt, while the grin

on the face of Smith, Sr., the tall first baseman, was most exasperating.

A roar went up as Jack walked back to the bench shaking his head. Those elusive "spit" balls of Coddling had him guessing, and silently he stared at the slim pitcher who had proved his right to the name of wizard, as if trying to fathom where his own efforts fell short.

Now came Lanky Wallace. He was warmly greeted by friend and foe alike, for somehow everybody knew the elongated Columbia first baseman always did his level best, and played a clean, square game.

Lanky was more fortunate than Jack, for he hit the second ball Coddling floated up, hit it with a vim that sent the sphere whistling out toward left, much to the surprise of the pitcher, and the delight of the crowd.

As a man the entire mass swung to their feet to follow the course of the ball. Smith, Jr., so called to distinguish him from his brother, was covering ground at a great rate, in the hope of getting his hands upon the flying horsehide ere it went past.

"He's got it!" whooped the Bellport enthusiasts, as the left fielder made a fine leap in the air, and apparently snatched the ball down.

"Not much he has! Go it, both of you! He

knocked the ball down, but never held it! Run, you lazybones. Make a homer of it, Lanky!"

It seemed as though two thousand people were madly shrieking as the runners sped around the bases. Smith, Jr., had recovered the ball, and was relaying it home in the effort to catch Ralph at the plate. A great slide, however, allowed the Columbia man to get his run. Meanwhile, Lanky had reached third, and was held on that bag by the coach.

With two out and a man on third Buster Billings swung his bat as if ready to put the ball over the head of Snodgrass in right field.

"Give me an easy one, Mr. Pitcher. I'm only learning how to swing on 'em. Coach Willoughby says——" and then Buster hit it!

The ball took an awkward turn, so that although both the pitcher and second baseman made a dive at it neither was fortunate enough to fork the elusive sphere. Amid a frightful clamor the fat Columbia student managed to get to first, where he presently stood, wiping his red face with a bandana.

Of course Lanky easily came in, and the score had been raised to two, which was an encouraging start for the visitors, considering who was doing the pitching.

Tom Budd proved an easy victim, however. Coddling took a brace, and although the Columbia shortstop certainly tried his best to connect with one of

the bewildering drops which were handed up to him, he never touched the ball.

So the inning ended for Columbia, and they took the field. Confidence had, however, been installed in their hearts, for it seemed as if the terrible Coddling might after all not be so very hard to get at.

Frank had been up against most of these fellows before. He knew that they had a reputation as heavy hitters, and once started were hard to stop.

Snodgrass, the first man up, usually managed to draw his base. His very attitude at the plate bothered a pitcher, which was just what he meant it to do.

But Frank was determined that he should strike, and sent swift balls directly over until he had managed to get the other just where he wanted him. Then a well directed outcurve deceived Snodgrass. He went back to the bench amid the groans of the crowd.

Then up rose Hough, the doughty second baseman, who was playing in place of Captain Cuthbert Lee, on the sick list, with his trusty bat. He knocked imaginary dirt from the soles of his shoes and took his place. Hough had a good batting eye, and could pick one out all right.

Two balls and one strike had been called when he swung viciously. The sound of the connection was like a rifle report, and instantaneously the immense crowd gave a howl of delight.

Again was there an upheaval, as every eye tried to follow the flight of the rapidly shooting ball.

It was headed for the territory of Buster, and the fat fielder was straining every nerve to get within reaching distance of the flying sphere!

CHAPTER III

A GAME WORTH SEEING

"See the ice wagon move!"

"It's got an engine attached to it somewhere, fellows!"

"Will he get it—maybe, maybe not!" whooped Jack Eastwick.

"It's a balloon, that's what it is!" howled one Bellport enthusiast.

They saw Buster glancing over his shoulder once or twice as he ran. It was a perfect wonder that he did not stumble and fall flat, for on more than one former occasion that was what had happened to the apparently clumsy fielder.

But Frank had high hopes. He knew that Buster could rise to an emergency, and really accomplish the impossible—for such stockily built fellows of his class. He held his breath as the fielder turned squarely around and threw up one of his hands. Hough was already shooting down toward second in wild haste. If Buster made a mess of it the hit

was likely to count a home run, for it had enough steam behind it to carry far afield.

"He did it, Buster did it!" cried dozens of voices, as though the speakers had considerable difficulty in believing their own eyes.

Then a fierce wave of sound went surging over the field. It was a fine play that appealed to the sportsmanlike spirit of an American crowd, so that even the warmest adherents of Bellport High joined in the tremendous cheer that awoke the echoes in the hills near by.

And Hough walked in from second, shaking his head, and looking back toward the plump fielder as though he felt that he had been robbed.

Two out! It was a splendid beginning, and nerved Frank to keep up the good work. If the balance of the boys only did their duty as Buster had shown how, the game would turn out to be a one-sided affair at best.

But Frank knew the vagaries that attach to base-ball, which serve to give it its greatest charm. No game is won until the last man is put out. A rally can cause a winning team to go all to pieces, so that their opponents fairly "shoot holes through their ranks."

"Banghardt next!"

"He's the boy who can do it, else why his name?"

"Watch him knock the cover off the ball! See

the fielders move out. Oh! Allen knows this chap. He's the swift bunch, all right!"

After all this boasting it must have been a bit humiliating to the Bellport boosters to see their idol strike out; but that was what the mighty Banghardt did. Three separate times did he send that wagon-tongue bat of his whistling through the air, each occasion being marked with a distinct grunt as it met only vacant space, for the ball was not where he believed it to be.

"Better luck next time, Tony! Taking his measure are you?" yelled a Columbia boy, derisively, as the fielder threw his bat savagely away, and started out to attend to his territory, for the inning was over.

Coddling took a brace after that first unfortunate affair, and the next three visitors who faced him were mowed down in regular order. His curves were most exasperating, his speed terrific, and he could mix a few fadeaway balls with the others in a fashion that kept the batter guessing all the time.

So once more Frank went into the box to face the hard-hitting Bellport men.

"Promises to be a warm game," remarked a man who happened to be sitting beside Lef Seller on the bleachers.

"Oh! I don't know," replied the disgruntled Columbia student, a pitcher of no mean merit himself,

and who, but for his own misconduct, might have been serving on the team as a substitute. "That Coddling is a marvel sure, and they say he gets better right along, finishing strong. It's different with Frank. You see he starts well, but any little thing is apt to rattle him badly, so that he goes to pieces."

This was not so, as Lef well knew, but he could never resist the temptation to give the boy he hated a sly and underhand dig.

The gentleman looked at his hat-band curiously.

"You're from Columbia, too, I believe, judging from the purple and gold ribbon you wear?" he remarked, with a slight sneer.

"Oh! yes, I used to pitch for them last year, but the faculty jumped on me for some foolish little thing I did, and refused to let me take part this season. Frank does his best, we all know, but he isn't just as steady as he might be," continued Lef, brazenly.

"That's queer. I had an idea Frank was about as cool a player as I had ever seen in my old days at Princeton. If that's the reputation he has then I've made the poorest play of my life, and I used to be considered a judge. Buster gave me to understand differently."

"Then you know Buster Billings?" asked Lef, quickly and uneasily.

"Why, I'm stopping at his house just now," came the reply.

"Oh! then I can understand how it comes you think so highly of Frank, because he has a few chums always ready to sneeze when he takes snuff. There are some others in Columbia, and I own that I'm one of the gang, who believe Frank Allen to be a greatly overrated athlete. There! did you see him pass that man. He never pitched near the plate. I told you he could be easily rattled!"

"Wait, my boy. Many a pitcher, as you know, does that, when he feels it in his bones that the batter is able to hit the ball. Besides, perhaps he knows that the next man is an easy mark for him," remarked the gentleman, who seemed to be quite at home with regard to the fine points of the game.

"That Smith, Jr., is the left fielder, and I have seen him send the ball out of sight. But his brother is no pie either, and if Frank thinks he's going to mow him down he has another guess coming," muttered Lef, eagerly watching, and ready to howl should the batter connect.

"One strike!" announced the umpire, though the man had not swung at all.

With the next ball he did strike viciously, but the merry plunk as the horsehide sphere settled comfortably in the big mitt of Paul Bird told that he

had failed to properly gauge the line of its rifleball flight.

After that came a foul and two balls. Frank believed he had his measure taken, and it was with the utmost confidence that he sent in one of his tantalizing out-curves.

"You're out!" shouted the umpire.

The man on first had not dared run down, for he knew Frank's battery mate was a remarkably accurate thrower to second; and that only on rare occasions had any opposing player purloined that sack while Paul Bird stood behind the plate.

"Only one down!" shouted the coach near first, dancing about in an effort to divert the pitcher's attention from his business; but Frank was up to all such stale tricks, and paid no attention to Snodgrass, his eye being on Lacy at the bat, and Smith, Jr., on the initial sack.

Lacy was reckoned the dude of Bellport High. He always seemed as though "walking on eggs," as some of the Columbia fellows said, and his manner of dressing in the very latest style had gained him the name of being a dandy. But when it came to covering that short field he had few peers among the school teams in that part of the country.

He could also lace them out on occasion, too, having that very desirable quality in a successful player, called a "batting eye."

Frank knew him of old, and played him cautiously. In spite of his care, however, Herb reached out and tapped one of his outshoots. The ball went plunging in the direction of short, and the crowd gasped to see how that acrobatic Tom Budd did his part of the business.

He threw himself headlong at the passing ball, as though his legs were unable to carry him fast enough. They saw him turn a complete somersault and land on his feet like an acrobat in the circus.

"Wow!" howled the amazed Bellport players, as Tom whirled and sent the ball to Seymour on second, who instantly relayed it to Lanky just in time to cut off the leaping Lacy while he was yet in the air.

"A double! What do you think of that for playing?" shrieked the Columbia crowd, standing on their feet, and waving the colors of their school as if frenzied.

"What sort of a human hinge have you got out there in short?" asked the gentleman alongside Lef; "I've seen some clever plays in my time, but that certainly beat them all out. Can that chap play baseball standing on his head?"

"Oh! that's Tom Budd, and he's always doing stunts. Sometimes he succeeds, but more often makes a muss of it," grunted Lef, who had felt disgusted to see Bellport mowed down so easily when things looked bright for a run.

"I'm glad I happened to see him when he succeeded, then. That was worth ten times the price of the admission. I came to see a baseball match, but this is as good as a circus," laughed the other.

Lef moved away. Somehow or other he felt that he would be in more congenial atmosphere among some of the Bellport rooters, and listening to derogatory remarks concerning the fellow he detested.

It was Ralph at the bat again, and this time he went out on a fly that Snodgrass captured after a hard run. Shadduck fanned after knocking about seven fouls that gave Clay a number of hard runs without any success at corraling one. And while Jack Comfort managed to lift one that landed him on first, he perished on the way to second, owing to Clay's straight shoot to the bag.

In their half of the third, Bellport managed to put one run over. Shaddock fumbled a hot liner that came his way, allowing the stout Bardwell to gallop to first. Then Clay lifted a fly that, while caught, gave the other a chance to land on second.

"Play the game, fellows!" shouted the eager watchers, as the pitcher took his place to bat.

Coddling bunted, and while out at first the chance was given Bardwell to settle himself comfortably on third.

This compelled Snodgrass to hit, something he seldom did, preferring to get his base on balls.

With a lucky little pop fly that neither Lanky nor Buster could reach before it fell, he brought his man in.

Hough went out on a long fly to Comfort, so that the score was now two to one in favor of Columbia.

Frank, when coming in, glanced up toward the grandstand. He knew very well just where his sister and Minnie Cuthbert were seated, and nodded his head with a smile in answer to the furious waving of the little purple and gold banners both girls carried. It was an inspiration to him to know that they were watching his work.

Then he looked up at the beautiful pennant that floated over the field, offered by the same Mr. Garabrant who had towed their disabled launch, to the club winning the greater number of games in this tri-school league series of battles on the diamond.

"You'll get it, Frank, never fear!" shouted some one from the bleachers, seeing that look he gave.

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," jeered a Bellport rooter.

"It's a bully good fight, all right," admitted a Clifford man, "and we're only sorry to be out of it up our way. But most of our people want Columbia to win."

Three more innings saw no change in the score. Several hits were made off each pitcher, but good

fielding, and a tightening up all around, prevented any damage resulting from such isolated cases.

So the seventh commenced, with the strain greater than ever.

"Hold them down, Frank! You've got it, if you do!"

"But do some little batting yourselves, boys. Get at him! Coddling's easy when you just know how!" jeered the other side.

When Paul Bird stepped up to the plate to take his turn at the beginning of the seventh some one started to sing, "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean." A score of voices instantly joined in, followed by hundreds of others, until there was so much noise that the decisions of the umpire could not be heard above it, and he had to depend on gestures entirely.

And while the uproar was at its height Paul was sent to first on balls!

"Coddling is getting rattled, boys! Keep it up!" shrieked a dozen frantic Columbia fellows, waving their ribbon bedecked hats wildly.

"Watch Frank bring him in with a three-bagger! He can do it, all right!" sang the crowd, as the pitcher stepped quietly up to the plate.

CHAPTER IV

THE RALLY THAT CAME TOO LATE

Frank gave no sign of the excitement that thrilled his every nerve. He realized that possibly a fortunate hit on his part right then and there would eventually win the game.

Despite the furious racket that kept up on every hand, he faced Coddling, and prepared to do his very best to at least advance the runner.

As a rule pitchers are not reckoned good batters, but Frank Allen had always been known to hit well. Coddling therefore tightened up, and determined to put his rival out of the running by tempting him with some of his astonishing assortment of curves and drops, for his swift ball had already cost him dear, so that he was afraid to use it often.

Frank even allowed a strike to be called on him before he picked out one that seemed to his liking. What he did to that ball was a caution. It sailed away out in right, and Snodgrass had the run of his life to chase after it.

Paul, reaching second, paused, an instant, for if the ball were caught, he would have some difficulty getting back to first in time.

"Go on, Paul!" bellowed the coach through his hands.

The noise had broken out worse than ever, so that each player had to be a law unto himself just then.

"He muffed it! Run! run! run!" whooped everybody who had the interest of Columbia at heart, while the Bellport adherents looked dismal enough.

It was an excusable error, for the fielder had fallen headlong at the instant his fingers touched the ball. He was up like a flash and chasing after it. Paul circled the bases and easily came home, but the coach held Frank at third, as the ball was coming in when he reached there.

Nevertheless, it had been a three-bagger, despite the mess Snodgrass had made of his effort to capture the fly, and a run had resulted. Frank had reason to feel satisfied with himself as he crouched there and panted for breath.

He knew that the chances were he would be a little off in his work unless this inning lasted for some time. That was one reason why his fellow players tried to delay matters as best they could within reason. Ralph tied his shoe, and then knocked three fouls, finally going out on one that Clay managed to get after a furious rush among the

crowd to the right, and which brought him much hand-clapping.

Then Bones Shadduck tried his hand. He wanted to bring Frank in, and struck savagely at what he considered fair balls; but Coddling had him guessing, and finally put him to sleep with a fadeaway that had not even reached the plate when the batter tried to knock it out of sight, and "fell all over himself," as Lanky said, while doing so.

In their half of this inning the Bellport boys seemed to awaken from the trance that had been binding them. There was a hustle and an energy to their play that told Frank he had better take care, or a batting rally would set in under which Bellport would speed to victory as on former occasions.

Bardwell opened with a hit that bounded off the shins of Seymour. When the captain and second baseman of Columbia managed to snatch up the ball it was too late to head the runner off, though Bardwell was a clumsy man on bases.

He pretended to limp around as though he had been spiked or something. The trick is, of course, as old as the hills. It only happens when a better runner is wanted on the initial bag. Seymour nodded his head when the Bellport captain called out, and accordingly Lacy was substituted for the elephantine Bardwell.

Clay tried to bring him in with a big hit away out in center, but Comfort was on his job in that territory, and managed to corral the ball after backing out, even though he could not keep Lacy from taking second.

Then came Coddling. He was no great batter, but there are times when baseball is full of surprises, and Frank was taking no chances.

"Fan him, Frank!" shouted an excited rooter from the grandstand.

"Let him hit it! Encourage a hard-working man a little!" called another.

Coddling tried his level best, but that did not seem good enough, for he presently walked back to the bench, with three strikes marked against his record.

Snodgrass waited, and got his base, though Frank considered that the umpire was unusually severe with him in calling balls, when he cut the plate with at least one of those that counted against him.

"Now, Hough, you know what to do!"

"Yes, Hough, lam it good and hard over old Billings' head. He'll never get another like he did that first one. That was an accident!"

"You've got him up in the air, boys! Lead that horse into the stable!"

Dozens of like cries sounded everywhere. It is a part of the game to try and rattle the pitcher when such an emergency arises.

Still, that faint smile remained on the face of Frank Allen, as he prepared to take the measure of this hard-hitting Bellport player, who had broken the reputation of at least one promising pitcher.

With two out, and men on first and third, Hough certainly had reason to do everything in his power to make a hit. Then came the sharp shock as the bat met one of Frank's curves on the nose, and the ball went shooting down toward third.

Shadduck stopped the speedy one as best he could, but it was coming like a comet, and he could not hold it. Jumping after the ball, he snatched it up. The chances of getting it to Paul were rather meagre, but it was his business to try, and he shot it for home.

No doubt the very rapidity of the play unsettled him, so that he failed to send the ball exactly where it would have cut the runner off. Paul had to reach out after it, and then tag the sliding runner.

"Safe!" shouted the umpire, who was there on the spot to see.

Meanwhile Paul had tossed the ball back to Shadduck, for there was danger of Snodgrass coming down from second while all this was going on; in fact, he had to be driven back with threatening gestures.

With two men on bases and two out, the inning still had possibilities, and loud waxed the exultant

cries of the Bellport rooters as they sang their school song and made a great demonstration.

"Got him up in a balloon! He's ascending, all right, boys! Give him another push, Tony!"

Banghardt stepped up full of confidence, and faced the pitcher with determination in his eye. Just two minutes later he dropped his bat and trotted out toward center, for the umpire had said that three balls which sailed past him were along the strike order—and the umpire belonged to Bellport, too, so that there could be little doubt but what he was right.

So the eighth began with Columbia still one run to the good, and Bellport just as positive as ever that they could not only make the lone tally necessary to tie, but add a few more for good measure.

Comfort, Lanky Wallace and Billings tried to accomplish something while they remained for a fleeting space of time on deck, but Coddling seemed to have taken a new lease of life, and they were unable to connect with a single one of his elusive benders.

Frank shut his teeth hard as he went into the box in turn. He was not given to weakening, despite all that the envious Lef had declared; and his arm felt just as good at that minute as in the second inning.

All Smiths looked alike to him, judging from the

way he struck the two brothers out, one after the other.

Herb Lacy managed to work him for a free pass to first, but after all it did him little good, for the next batter, Bardwell, lifted a foul that Paul gathered in against the grandstand, to the accompanying cheers of the occupants.

This brought affairs down to the ninth, and all over the field there was intense excitement.

"This is the lucky Bellport inning!" shouted one fellow, encouragingly.

"Watch them run the game out right here!"

"Will they? Maybe, maybe not!" answered Jack Eastwick.

Herman Hooker had jumped to his feet as Columbia went to bat for the last time. Up to the present he had been content to play a minor part, but now his time had come.

"Give it to them, boys—give them the slogan we love, good and strong. Hi! hi! hi! ho! ho! ho! *veni! vidi! vici!* Columbia! Siss! boom! ah!"

Amid such a pandemonium Tom Budd struck out, though he died trying to find one of those balls which Coddling seemed to be twining around his neck. Seymour was somewhat more fortunate. He raised a fine fly, but unfortunately it landed in the outstretched hands of Smith, Junior, who did not seem to stir a yard.

Paul Bird made a lucky hit that should have been an out, but the players were so nervous by this time that Lacy actually fumbled the ball. Frank, with all the encouragement that might accompany such backing as could spring from the "best yeller Columbia ever had," as he jumped up and down, and waved his megaphone violently, sent a hot liner liner straight at Hough on second that nearly took him off his feet, though he held it.

And then Bellport came to the bat. Every man looked grimly confident. Clay made a hit out of the first ball that came along, reaching out and stealing what was meant to be a wide one.

How those Bellport rooters did shriek and jump! It seemed as though they would go crazy as they begged and implored Coddling to win his own game by advancing the runner by a little bunt.

"He just can't do it, boys!" called one fellow, after Coddling had twice thrust out his bat and failed to even touch the speeding ball.

"Give him a pair of smoke glasses; the sun's in his eyes!"

"Three times and out, Coddling—take care, old hoss!"

This time Coddling, in despair, struck savagely, and perhaps to his own surprise, tapped the ball smartly toward second.

"Double 'em up!" arose the howl like a flash, for

the average baseball rooter can see the possibilities of a play as soon as a player.

And that was just what happened. Seymour snatched the ball from the ground with one hand, leaped over to his sack, and as his foot touched the same he threw for Lanky on first. Coddling was caught ten feet away, and a mighty groan attested to the strain under which the Bellport crowd was resting.

Snodgrass again found that he just had to strike, for Frank was putting them over on purpose now, having full confidence in the men back of him. Smash! went the ball. Lanky fell over very much like a ten pin that has been caught by a rapidly moving ball, but as he sat there he held up his hand to prove that he had forked the sphere out of the air and gripped it tight!

The game was over, and it had been a heartbreaking one all around. Immediately the great crowd flooded the ground, and the players were swallowed up in groups of admiring rooters. Herman Hooker led his gallant band in another cheer, in which the defeated Bellport team came in for a share of the shouting; after which there was a wild rush for all means of transportation whereby the thousands could hope to reach their homes in the neighboring towns.

When the Columbia players reached the river they

found that during their absence Abner Gould had succeeded in repairing the motor, so that it was now in condition to take them back home. Frank could not be sure that his suspicions were well founded, and hence he decided to say nothing about the matter. If the man had been hired by his sporting brother to delay the Columbia team, and annoy them so that they would go upon the field nervous and unstrung, he had been caught in his own trap.

Ralph West seemed anxious to speak to Frank in private. They were on the way up the river, and most of the boys had stretched out, talking over the various thrilling events of the great game, when Ralph dropped down beside Frank.

"I've been wanting to say a few words to you ever since we left Columbia, but couldn't get the chance," he said in a low tone.

Frank could see that he was unduly excited, and he did not believe that this came wholly from his clever work in the recent game.

"All right, Ralph; what is it?" he asked encouragingly, for they had been good friends for some time, and Frank knew all about certain strange events connected with the past life of the freshman who had made good on the Columbia nine.

"I went to the postoffice just before we started out," commenced Ralph.

Frank started, and looked at him eagerly.

"This is just after the first of the month, and that mysterious letter with the money enclosed used to always come at such a time. Well, what happened?" he asked.

"I got the letter," replied Ralph, drawing a long breath.

"With the money in it?"

"Yes, just as before," answered the freshman, gulping hard as something seemed to choke him; "and not a single word. Frank, it's all opened up again, and I must know who is sending me this money. You promised to help me, and I'll never rest easy until I learn who I am!"

CHAPTER V

A THUNDERBOLT IN THE SCHOOL

"Let me see the envelope, Ralph," Frank said, soothingly.

"Here it is, and it comes from your uncle's office, as before."

"That's a fact, and I'm going to ask Uncle Jim again to tell us what he knows of this queer arrangement. Somebody wants you to get an education, and takes this strange way of supplying the money. It's been coming ever since last summer, hasn't it, Ralph?"

"Yes. And you know that Mr. and Mrs. West, whom I always believed to be my parents, until lately, admitted that I was only adopted by them, taken from the poorhouse. Then there was that poor Ben Davis. It looked to me that he might be the one; but we saw him before he died, and he denied that he knew anything about me. Oh, this is a terrible fix for a fellow to be in!"

"Cheer up, old chap. Come around to-night, and

I'll get father to take a hand in the game. Perhaps he can induce Uncle Jim to explain who sends this money on the sly through him. He said he had promised not to tell, but dad may influence him some way. I wouldn't say anything more about it now. The fellows are looking over this way, as though wondering."

So Ralph tried to change his look of anxiety and gloom to one that corresponded more nearly with the uproarous delight that caused the others to break out in almost continuous cheering under the inspiring influence of Herman Hooker.

That energetic individual was as hoarse as a crow by this time, however, and had to give a rest to the "best yelling voice that Columbia ever knew," taking it out in gestures that were almost tragic.

And so in the evening of that never-to-be-forgotten day they arrived home, to find the town gaily decked in bunting, and crowds of students parading the streets cheering and singing.

Columbia promised to be painted red that night of the great victory over the strong Bellport team. Even the girls joined in the cheering and singing; while an old cannon was made to do duty on the green, with a salute to the boys who had carried the colors of Columbia High to victory that day.

One returning pilgrim saw nothing to boast about in the snatching of this close game from Bellport.

That was Lef Seller. All the way back he had been in more or less of a wordy war with various enthusiastic rooters on the trolley, and his remarks had been of a nature that almost caused him to be tossed overboard.

"His father may own this road, but that doesn't excuse him for running down his own school!" declared one of the old graduates of Columbia High, in disgust.

Lef was in a very bitter frame of mind. To see Frank come out a winner was like gall and wormwood to his envious spirit. He racked his brain, with the idea of finding some way of "pulling that climbing duck down a peg," as he muttered to himself.

As a rule, when Lef Seller set about discovering some means of playing a "trick," as he called it, upon a school mate, he usually managed to get there, even though the gun he held sometimes kicked worse at the butt than it did damage from the muzzle.

"Be sure and come around after supper, Ralph. I'd ask you to go home with me now, but I know you want to wash up and get into some other duds. I'll look for you," remarked Frank, as the crowd went ashore and walked into the town.

"I'll be there. This matter is a mighty serious one with me, and if your father will only give me

a little help I'd be obliged," and Ralph shook the hand of his friend warmly.

"Poor chap," said Frank to himself, as he walked away and cast a glance over his shoulder to note that the other had dropped his chin upon his breast, as though lost in sad thought. "It must be a nightmare of a time not to know who you are. And then there's this money that comes every month from some unknown source. Whoever can it be sending it? Uncle Jim *must* tell, that's all there is to it."

Uncle Jim meant Judge James Decatur Allen, away down in New York. Frank had already appealed to him, but the lawyer in reply had said he did not feel able to explain the mystery, since he had given his word to his unknown client.

That night there was a council of war. Mr. Allen heard the whole story, and was deeply interested in the fortunes of poor Ralph.

"I'll write to Jim to-morrow, and explain things. No matter if he has promised, he ought to take pity on you, Ralph, and give you a hint. If you knew it wasn't your relatives who were sending this money, your mind would be at ease, I suppose?" was what the gentleman had said.

"I might refuse to accept another cent of it in that case," replied Ralph, sturdily.

"While I can understand how you feel about that, let me caution you to go slow about looking a gift

horse in the mouth. An education is priceless, and even if the money came from some distasteful source, you could still receive it and make up your mind to positively return it some day."

"Thank you, sir; that is what I meant to do, anyway," said Ralph.

"Meanwhile say nothing about this. When I hear from Jim I'll have another talk with you. Perhaps he may see fit to confide enough to me so that I can at least ease your mind. And, Ralph, consider that this is something of a second home to you. We have all grown to like you very much, my lad."

Ralph could not reply, for he seemed too full of sentiment for utterance; but he squeezed the hand Mr. Allen gave him, and his look was eloquent enough.

On the following week there was little talked of at school but that wonderful game at Bellport. The next one, on the following Saturday, would be played on the Columbia grounds; and the third as dictated by fortune in the way of a tossed coin.

Lef Seller was green with envy at the praise he heard concerning the masterly way Frank had pitched.

"Just as if nobody ever won a game before. Huh! there are half a dozen to my credit, and some of 'em as hot as that one. But did you ever hear of the old school going crazy over my work. I guess not!

But that Allen—oh, splash! I get sick hearing the mention of his name!"

That was the way he talked to his two cronies, Bill Klemm and Tony Gilpin, after school was out, about the middle of the week.

Lef was sure of sympathy in this quarter, and it did much to bolster up his resolution to get even with Frank, no matter what happened.

"Course you couldn't 'spect to be looked at in the light of a hero. It's only the fellers what strut around and try to look like tin gods on wheels that gets the ribbons. Look at them gals talking to him now. He ain't any better lookin' than you, Lef, but he's just got Minnie dead struck after him," remarked Tony, with his usual disregard for all the rules of grammar.

"Aw, let up on that, won't you? Want to rub salt in a feller's cuts, I guess. Don't I see it all, and ain't I just boiling with madness. She used to think somethin' of me before she got going with that conceited little Helen Allen, and Frank, he butted in. I never will forgive him for that, and it won't be long before he'll get his, all right!" and Lef nodded his head as he spoke, in a suggestive way those cronies of his understood meant fight.

But the tactics of Lef were never along that order which brought about an open rupture. Fight he would, if he could get the object of his hatred alone,

and have backing of his own, so that the odds were three to one; but Lef had too much respect for the strong muscles and agility of Columbia's crack athlete to risk a solitary meeting with him.

No matter what he had in his mind he would not confide in either of the others. When they asked him he simply put his tongue in his cheek and grinned, which signs they understood meant trouble for Frank Allen.

On Thursday morning, after the exercises in the assembly hall, the principal of the school, instead of dismissing the various classes to their rooms, asked them to remain, as he had a communication of importance which he wished to make.

Expectation was on tiptoe immediately.

Crafty Tony Gilpin, stealing a side look over toward Lef, caught a fleeting glow of expectancy in his eyes, while his manner of leaning forward indicated that he might know what was coming.

"He's gone and done it!" was Tony's prompt inward declaration, and immediately his admiration for his chief was increased tenfold.

Every eye was fastened upon Professor Parke as he stood up facing them. The ordinarily genial teacher looked very sober, and this fact caused many a heart to beat with apprehension, as various lads imagined that some prank in which they were con-

cerned had been found out, and public disgrace was to follow.

"Young ladies and gentlemen," began the professor, who was always in the habit of addressing the students in this dignified way, just as though his training as a college man would allow of nothing else, "I have a very painful duty to perform this morning, and one I never thought would devolve upon me here at Columbia, though I have heard of it happening elsewhere."

You could have heard a pin drop as he stopped for a moment. Two hundred and fifty hearts were thrilled by his words. Every one present, save, possibly, one, wondered what it could be the professor was about to say. Tony was still shooting those fugitive glances across the room, and each time he observed the actions of his comrade he kept repeating to himself:

"Lef knows! He's in this game, all right. He said he'd do *something,* and I just reckon he has, all right. Bully for Lef!"

The professor spoke again, and his voice carried to the furthest point in that large room, so that every one could hear what he said.

"I repeat that I have had a schock. I did not believe there could be a student under my charge so dishonorable as to attempt anything so small and mean as this seems. And I am sure that every one

here, save the miscreant who is guilty, will agree with me in saying that, when you hear how he planned to take advantage of the rest of you."

Lef was licking his lips now, and trying hard to hide the grin that seemed to want to creep over his face. He had all the appearance of one who was enjoying a delightful treat, and yet who, for diplomatic reasons, did not want other eyes to note the fact.

"Yesterday afternoon," continued the Head, slowly, while his eyes roved around the room, "I received the first batch of examination papers from the printers, far in advance of the usual time. I counted them three times, and marked the number on a slip, so that I could always be sure none were missing."

A half suppressed sigh seemed to pass over the room. Most of the students could begin to guess at what was coming. They understood now what the professor intended to convey when he spoke of every one being cheated by the work of the malefactor.

"Something called me away just then, and I did a very unwise thing—thrust the packet of papers into my desk, and left the latter open; but I never dreamed that any one in this school could be guilty of stealing the questions that mean the promotion of the juniors in this year's classes.

"I was away about half an hour. Upon returning, something seemed to tell me that my desk had been entered, since things were plainly disturbed. And when I recounted the packet *I found just one paper short!*"

Again he paused, and the entire assemblage seemed to catch its breath, waiting.

"When I had made sure that one of the papers was gone, my pleasure over the fine showing of Columbia in the week just passed fled. I knew that unless that stolen paper were found, the entire batch would have to be destroyed, for fear lest it be passed around, and make our examination a mockery.

"This morning I received a singular communication from an unknown party, who claims that he dares not sign his name, because it would make him enemies; but he affirms that he saw a certain student coming out of the office during yesterday afternoon, and that following him up, he discovered him looking at a piece of paper which seemed to him to be a set of questions used in our yearly examinations.

"As a rule, I seldom take any notice of anonymous communications, but in this case I feel it a duty I owe the entire junior class to do everything in my power to discover the guilty one. The name mentioned in this communication was one that stunned me; but since it has been brought before my atten-

tion, there seems to be nothing for me to do but request the person in question to plead guilty or innocent."

Then he swept his eyes around, while many a lad shivered in mortal fear, until finally, they came to a pause, and the professor exclaimed:

"Frank Allen, come forward, please!"

CHAPTER VI

THE VINDICATION

"Oh!"

It seemed as though a score of voices framed that one word. A few of the students looked pleased because suspicion seemed to have alighted upon a shining mark, but the vast majority were shocked and stunned. Helen turned as white as a little ghost, while Minnie Cuthbert half rose from her seat, and stared at the principal as though she thought he had surely taken leave of his senses.

Frank stood up quickly. He could not help it if his face burned just then, for any one would naturally be confused at so sudden an accusation.

Almost as quickly the color left his face, and he flashed a defiant look around, as if to discover who it was chuckled, for it appeared that Lef could not wholly contain himself.

Frank walked directly in front of the professor, and looked him straight in the face. He bore himself proudly, as might an innocent lad upon whom

FRANK WALKED DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE PROFESSOR, AND LOOKED HIM STRAIGHT IN THE FACE.

unjust suspicion had been cast. If some enemy had done this, Frank did not intend to let him have the satisfaction of seeing how it hurt.

"Frank, were you in my office alone at any time yesterday afternoon?" asked Professor Parke steadily, as he gazed at the lad before him, and those who knew anything about reading expression would have seen readily enough that it was more like a look of sincere affection that he gave the boy than one of accusation or doubt.

"I was not, sir," came the immediate response, clear-cut and ringing.

"This communication, which, as I said before, has no name attached to it, states that you probably have that examination paper in your pocket at this moment. Is there any truth in that assertion, Frank?" went on the principal.

"So far as I know, sir, there is not. I am perfectly willing to have any one search me over. In fact, sir, after what has been said I *demand* that it be done," said the student, indignantly.

"Suppose you do it yourself, Frank. Place everything in your pockets on my desk here, please."

With a smile Frank started to obey. Of course, every eye followed each of his movements, and Lanky Wallace, who happened to be just behind Lef, wondered why the fellow gripped his desk and partly

arose, as his lips kept forming unuttered words, and he trembled all over.

Suddenly Frank's smile faded. He had a troubled look on his face as he slowly drew something out, took one swift glance at it, and then handed it up to the professor.

"It's the paper!"

"Oh, he had it after all!"

"How did it ever happen? I don't believe he ever took it!"

"Isn't it dreadful, girls?" this last from Emily Dodsworth, who had often tried to interest Frank Allen in her own simpering self, but without success.

Frank stood there, looking straight up into the eyes of the principal.

"This is indeed the missing examination paper. The unknown party to whom we are so heavily indebted certainly told the truth when he said it would be found in your pocket, Frank. Are you willing to answer me one question?"

"I will answer as many as you ask me, sir," replied the boy, without quailing.

"Have you ever seen this paper before, Frank?"

"I give you my word for it, sir, that I never set eyes on it until I drew it out of my pocket just now. I don't know how it got there, unless some fellow put it there for fun, or to injure me."

A few smiled disdainfully. They were the ones

who had always been envious of Frank Allen's popularity in the school, and rejoiced to see him even temporarily under a cloud.

But there were ten to one who looked terribly stunned, and found it hard to realize that the boy they had all admired as a shining example of honesty and candor could even be accused of so despicable a thing as this, the smallest, meanest cheat of which any student could be guilty.

"I wish to state right here, Frank, that I believe you are speaking the exact truth," said the professor, with one of his rare smiles; "and I'm going to explain just what I mean by that, if you will all sit back in your seats and listen."

The silence became profound. Even Lef had drawn within his shell, so to speak, at this unexpected remark from the Head, as if he might have been a cautious old tortoise. He scented trouble from afar, and was preparing to put on an innocent look. When Lef was really on his guard, it would require a keen eye indeed to detect guilt in his face. He could stare any one in the countenance and lie out of any hole deliberately and vehemently.

"In the first place," went on the principal, "I have always set it down as an absolute fact that in nine cases out of ten an anonymous communication is the work of a sneak, a coward, and generally a crim-

inal, who wants to throw dust in the eyes of possible pursuers, so as to effect his own escape. Either that, or else it is his intention to ruin the reputation of the party he accuses.

"It might give me more or less embarrassment, though not anxiety, in the premises, Frank, on account of this paper being found on your person, only for one thing. And that was just where circumstances conspired to make the wretch who could so miserably plot to harm a fellow student, overreach himself.

"After I had placed those papers in my desk, I went straight to the gymnasium, where you were practising, and called you aside. In my company you went to ascertain about certain matters that you had called to my attention, and where repairs were absolutely necessary. And I wish to state emphatically that during the half hour I was from my room Frank Allen was actually at my side every minute of the time until I stepped into my office again!"

He paused, as if to let the effect of his statement sink into the minds of the whole assemblage. Then there came a ripple that immediately broke into a deluge of cheers, until the entire building seemed to vibrate with the tremendous volume of sound.

Nor did Principal Parke raise a hand to assuage the voluntary tribute to the popularity of the boy who had been under so unjust a suspicion! Mr.

Amos Wellington, one of the other men teachers, raised a hand feebly, but who cared for his protest when the Head, by his silence, gave tacit consent to the shouts.

Then Professor Parke bent over and offered his hand to Frank, which action was the occasion for more cheers and a tiger, as well as the school yell. There certainly had never been such an extraordinary spectacle seen in old Columbia High during the twenty years of its existence.

And Lef shouted just as loudly as the rest! He did not dare hold back, lest suspicion be turned his way. He was trembling in his shoes even then as the enormity of his iniquity burst upon him. What if the janitor, Soggy Dolan, had glimpsed him when he slipped out of the office, for the latter had gone past with a step ladder on his shoulder, and might have turned his head, unknown to the culprit.

Lanky thought it queer that Lef should seem so pleased over the vindication of one toward whom he was known to bear only ill will. He imagined that this sudden change of heart on the part of Lef might be placed in the same category as the suspicion said to attach to the Greeks bearing gifts.

And so, after all, the incident that had been planned as calculated to attach infamy to Frank's name only served to raise him still further in the

estimation of his schoolmates, and the teachers of Columbia High.

And it was certainly a pleasure to have them all swarm around him later on, to declare their satisfaction and delight at his complete vindication.

Frank was far from satisfied.

It was a dreadful thought to realize that he had an enemy in the school vindictive enough to do such a terrible thing as this, simply to crush him.

"Ten to one I could guess who he is," said Lanky, angrily.

"Have you any proof of it?" asked Frank.

Lanky was forced to admit that his declaration was only grounded on certain suspicious circumstances. He would have told of Lef's queer actions, but Frank declined to listen.

"I'm going to try and find out the truth for myself, Lanky; but whatever I do, I won't accuse any one until I can pin him down with indisputable proof," he said.

"And then what, Frank?"

"Well, I won't say, but the miserable coward who would try to strip a fellow of his reputation hadn't ought to be allowed to go free," and had Lef seen the flash in the eyes that accompanied these words, he would very likely have trembled more than ever, and tried to walk a chalk-line.

Frank sought the principal after school. He

found the professor in his office, and the other welcomed him with a warm smile.

"What can I do for you, Frank? You understand that not for a single minute did I dream that you were guilty. I had remembered the circumstances of your being in my company every bit of the time while I was out of here, and the thief crept in to rob my desk. But I would give a good deal to be able to find out who played so mean a trick upon you."

"Will you let me see the paper you received, sir?" asked Frank.

"That you will find in my waste-paper basket yonder. Now that you mention it, I can see that it was unwise of me to toss it aside contemptuously. Have you found it, my lad?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank, bending over.

"I see, you think it possible to recognize the writing. But in this case the scoundrel followed the usual custom with all anonymous letter writers, for he simply printed the words," remarked the principal.

"Yes, sir, I notice he did. And the paper seems to be just what is used by every student in school, as the supplies come from you," observed Frank, still examining the crumpled sheet.

"I'm afraid that we may never know who did it, unless through some accident."

"Where did you find this note, sir?" continued

the boy, eagerly, as though a sudden idea had struck him.

"Slipped under my door here when I opened it this morning. You know Mr. Dolan does not open my office save on Saturdays, when he cleans. Whoever put the paper under the door chose a time when no one was likely to see him."

"You threw this in the basket as soon as you read it, sir?"

"Yes, for, as I remarked, I was indignant," replied the professor, curiously wondering what all these questions implied.

"And at that early time I don't supose you were using your ink at all, sir?"

"Certainly not, Frank. What makes you ask that, lad?"

Frank spread the paper, which he had smoothed out, before the gentleman.

"You see, sir, whoever wrote this used ink; and in some way or other he must have gotten a certain small amount on his fingers and thumb. Look here, and you will see where there is a very plain imprint of a thumb, and from the other marks that accompany it, I should say that it is the *left* thumb, too!"

"You interest me amazingly, my boy. And it is all just as you say. I do declare, it must be the left thumb that has left an imprint here. I see what you have in mind, Frank. Go your own way about

it. If you discover the guilty one, I leave it to you entirely whether you bring him before me or not. This is your especial affair, and you can manage it as you please."

"Well, I happened to be reading lately how they take the imprint of criminals' thumbs over in France, and that no two are exactly alike. With other measurements, it is called the Bertillon system, and has been found to work well. There, I have made an impression of my left thumb, and you can see, sir, that the lines are very much unlike this one."

"Frank, you are correct, and I give you credit for so much acumen. But do you want me to call every boy in school in here and take an impression of each left thumb, so that we can discover the one rascal?" smiled the principal.

"Oh, no, sir, but I thought I'd like to try on my own hook, to see if I could land him," exclaimed Frank.

"All right, go ahead. I give you free permission, and wish you luck. And, Frank, perhaps you have already some idea as to what direction you mean to hunt first of all," this last with uplifted eyebrows and a questioning look.

"Well, sir," said Frank, as he turned to depart with the precious paper safe in his pocket, "I suppose I have suspicions, but they may be unjust toward a certain party, and I wouldn't mention them

to any one. Thank you, Professor, for helping me. If I succeed, perhaps I may bring the proof to you. It all depends upon circumstances."

"Ah, yes," murmured the professor, after he found himself alone; "I can understand what that means. If the rascal pleads only strong enough that generous lad will even go so far as to forgive him, and hush the ugly matter up, for the honor of Columbia. Would that there were more like him!"

CHAPTER VII

THE IMPRINT IN THE CLAY

"I DON'T believe in it, that's all!" said Lanky Wallace, with a shake of his head.

"Well, now, for my part, I'm not so hard to convince. Just because they look alike at first glance is no reason why it would be so if you put our hands under a magnifier. I kind of side with Frank," observed Buster Billings.

They were gathered in a group in the gymnasium, and chattering like magpies. A dozen or more boys had dropped in after school Thursday afternoon, as a drizzling rain prevented any outdoor work, and there were many temptations for lovers of athletics in that well equipped gym.

"Do you mean to tell me," burst out Lanky, with a look of scorn, "that everybody's two hands differ, and that yours are entirely unlike mine. I just fail to see it, and I'm not the only one, either."

"That's so," remarked Jack Eastwick; "as for me,

I side with Lanky. You'll have to show me, Frank, before I'll back down."

Others of the boys began to gather around, attracted by the animated discussion, just as Frank had been hoping they would. He had noted the fact that Lef Seller was in the place, not doing much in the way of exercise, for he had been debarred from competing in the track team or taking part in any athletic rivalry for the balance of the term, and could only look on and make sarcastic remarks.

But, somehow, there seemed to be an attraction to Lef in the person of Frank Allen. Perhaps it may have been on a par with the fatality that draws the silly moth to the flame of the candle. He had tried to wrong the other terribly, and, the plot having failed, he seemed eager to catch anything that was said concerning the matter by Frank or his chums.

So, among the rest, he lounged over to the spot where Frank sat, upon the edge of a little table, idly swinging his leg to and fro. Apparently Frank never paid the slightest attention to the presence of Lef; but, truth to tell, he was keenly alive to the fact.

"What's all this talk about over here?" demanded Seymour, pushing into the group.

Lanky took it upon himself to explain.

"Why, Frank was springing a joke on the lot of us. He says that our two hands are totally unlike —that if an impression was made of each fellow's

right and left, he'd never dream they belonged to the same body. What do you think of that, Rod. It's going some, for Frank, eh?"

The captain of the nine looked thoughtful.

"You may smile at it, fellows, but really I'm inclined to side with Frank. I've read some strange things along that line lately, and believe there's considerable truth in it," he marked, soberly.

At this Lanky laughed jeeringly. He had been taken into the scheme far enough by Frank to know how to play his part. And out of the corner of his eye he saw that Lef Seller had hung to the outskirts of the crowd, listening with some show of interest to what was said. Lef, as a rule, had been frowned upon of late when he came around, and as no one noticed him now, he felt encouraged to remain. No boy likes to feel that he is an outcast among his schoolmates.

"Prove it, Frank!" scoffed Lanky.

"Yes, make your assertion good, old chap!" echoed Buster, encouragingly.

"Well, why not? And here's a splendid chance to make the test," declared Frank, jumping down from his seat.

He strove to act as though badgered into the exposition of his belief, when to tell the actual truth, the stage had all been set beforehand for just this opening.

"What's he going to do, boys?" asked Jack Eastwick.

"Oh, I get on to his curves. See there, on that window seat are a dozen little boxes. You know what they contain, fellows?" cried Lanky.

"The modeling clay Mr. Oswald uses in his geographic lectures!" said Tom Budd, as he placed his hands on the table Frank had just vacated, gave a hitch to his lower extremeties, and after a whirl through the air like a cart wheel, once more calmly alighted on his feet.

"That's just what. I've seen him show the topography of a dozen countries with that stuff. It's a fad of Ossie's. But what can Frank want with it? Is he going to manufacture some artificial hands to prove his words?" asked Jack, the doubter.

"Now, look here, you fellows who doubt my assertion. I'm going to make good; not only in my own case, but every one of you have got to be convinced by seeing how your own hands differ in a dozen ways. Each fellow take one of these trays, just as I am doing. Are you game to try?" asked Frank.

"I'm ready for the test, and I'm not giving back a word. Convince me, and I'll own up, but I've got to be shown," declared Lanky.

"Me, too!" echoed Jack, seizing a little box and leveling the clay with a pad used for the purpose, until it was perfectly smooth.

And Lef took the last tray! Frank chuckled when he saw that, for he felt that there was some hope at least that his neat little plan might not fall down in the start through the suspicion of the one at whom it was aimed.

"Bless the little innocent's heart!" whispered Lanky in Frank's ear.

"First of all, every fellow write his name on the tablet in front of his tray, so we'll know which is which," said Frank, earnestly.

"That's so," grinned Buster, "for I declare, if I'd want to stand sponsor for some of the paws other fellows own."

"The sentiment is kindly returned, Buster. You are welcome to a monopoly of your own kind of paws. Now, what, Frank?" queried Seymour.

"All got your signature down? Well, pad the stuff until it's just as smooth as the ice was last winter on the Harrapin, up near Rattail Island."

"Or as smooth as Lanky here when he's got his Sunday duds on," suggested Buster, with a chuckle.

"Now be very careful how you press your right hand gently down in the clay on that side of the tray. Lift it out quietly, so as to leave a positive impression. Got that, everybody?" Frank went on, suiting the action to the words himself.

"I'm on, all right!" called out one.

"Me, too, and it's just a dandy impression I made!" declared Buster, exultantly.

"You always do, especially when you take a header over the handlebars of your wheel. I've seen it!" spoke up Lanky, ready to get back at his chum for the various sly digs he had received.

Frank had his eyes about him. He knew that Lef was following up the little experiment just as eagerly as any of the others. It kept him near them, and thus he could hear what they might be talking about. If suggestions were offered concerning the identity of the unknown who had tried to get Frank into trouble, Lef was yearning to know the drift of the sentiment.

"Now, do the same with the left hand," Frank went on calmly, though his heart was undoubtedly beating faster than its wont; "and be mighty careful not to let it overlap the imprint of the right. How about that, fellows?"

"Mine is a perfect success!" declared Lanky, triumphantly.

"And mine's a blooming failure. What shall I do about it, Frank?" called out Buster, in disgust.

"Smooth it off and try again, until you're satisfied you've got a perfect impression of each hand," answered the master of ceremonies.

"What comes next?"

"Lay the trays down here on the table so we can all get around. Wait just a minute, fellows. I've sent up to borrow Mr. Oswald's big magnifier. That is going to prove my assertion so that even the scoffers will have to admit its truth. And here comes Alfred with the glass."

Frank took one look at the contents of the tray upon which he had written his own name. Then he handed the glass to Buster.

"Examine closely. Note first that there is a considerable difference in width. Then measure the same finger on each hand and you will see they differ in length. Next pay attention to the peculiar markings. No two fingers are alike in that respect, not even your own. Well, is it so, Buster?" asked Frank.

"Wow! I'm a misfit all right! Somebody must have got my other hand in the shuffle. The worst of it is, how am I to tell which one really belongs to the Billings family?" lamented the fat student, sighing in pretended distress.

So the glass went around. Frank stood still while Lanky followed the movement of the magnifier until every one had taken a look, and was ready to admit the truth of what Frank had said.

"No two alike in the whole bunch. I never would have believed it," admitted Lanky, who had been peering at every impression.

Without appearing to do so, he had managed to crowd several of the boys away from the table, and among them Lef; but having seen the wonders of the magnifying glass proven, like most of their type they had suddenly lost interest in the matter, and were already turning their attention toward the parallel bars, the swinging hoops and the punching bags.

Left alone at the table, Frank made a pretense of arranging the trays just as he had found them, now and then taking a look through the magnifier. He had his eye on Lef and waited until the other was engaged in some stunt at which he excelled.

At first Lef had been debarred even the privileges of the gymnasium on account of his playing a miserable trick upon Frank as the editor of the Columbia monthly paper; but after a bit this order had been rescinded, so that now he was allowed to join his fellows in their muscle-building work.

When Frank presently saw the name of Lef Seller written on the white tab of a moulding tray, and discovered that the imprints of the other's hands were plainly stamped there before him, he eagerly held his glass over the box. At the same time he drew out the paper that had come to Professor Peake, and compared the delicate tracery of lines on the

thumb with that which Lef had left behind him in the moulding clay.

There could be no possible mistake!

The same thumb had made both impressions beyond a possibility of doubt!

CHAPTER VIII

TOEING THE MARK

"So IT was that cur, just as I expected!"

Frank felt a glow of indignation pass over him at the conviction that he had by this simple but positive means of identification discovered the thief who had not only stolen the examination paper, but tried to rob him of his good name.

He and Lef had always been at war. Bitter rivals in all things, they had on many occasions faced each other on opposite sides. And because Frank usually managed to win in these contests Lef hated him bitterly.

Frank was puzzled as to what he should do. His first thought was to hasten to the principal's office and show him the proof of the charge he could make. Then he shook his head. Somehow that seemed to be too severe, for it would possibly result in the expulsion of the other student of Columbia High. And Frank hardly fancied having such a responsibility thrust upon his shoulders.

"I'll charge him with it, and if he says he's sorry, let the matter go. Anyhow, the mischief's done. Those papers will have to go back, and others be sent on. The little experiment has afforded me more or less amusement, and that counts for something. If I can only get Lef over here alone."

A bright thought struck Frank even while he was puzzling over this matter.

"That's the idea—I can slip into the lunch room, and coax him there."

First of all he carried the tray of moulding clay through the convenient door. Mrs. Louden, who had charge of the lunch counter, was still busily engaged. She made it a rule to linger when a bunch of the boys were working in the adjacent gymnasium, since that sort of thing developed enormous appetites, and many an extra dollar found its way into her till through this afternoon source.

After doing this Frank passed outside again.

"How?" remarked Lanky, as he sidled up alongside his friend.

But this was not intended to be an Indian salutation. Lanky was deeply interested, and wanted to know.

"I was right," said Frank.

There was no exultant strain to his voice such as one might expect. Truth to tell, he felt only indignation and disgust because of the fact that any fel-

low who had the home training Lef Seller enjoyed should descend so low as to endeavor to ruin a companion's reputation.

"Then soak him, pard! Show the measly skunk no mercy! He ought to be kicked out of Columbia, and that's the truth!" gritted the other.

Lanky knew his chum's tenderness of heart, and was afraid that Frank might be too easy with the culprit.

"Don't forget what you promised me when I let you in on this!"

"Oh! yes, you tied my hands good and hard, so that I couldn't let out even one measly little squawk. But my word is as good as my bond. Have it your own way, but I certainly hope you'll finish that fellow's loping so that he'll never try any more of his funny business on you again," grumbled Lanky.

"That would be almost too good," laughed Frank; "and now, while I go in the lunch room will you manage to tell Lef that some one wants to see him there?"

"Sure I will," grinned the other.

"And try to keep the boys out for a little while, will you, Lanky?"

"If it's possible, but you know as long as any fellow has a nickel in his jeans, and the spirit moves, he can't be kept away from Mother Louden's grub corner with a derrick. But I've just thought of a

funny story I'll tell 'em after Lef has gone to the block."

Lanky hurried away, while Frank passed through into the other room.

Two minutes later Lef hurried into the place and looked around. He seemed disappointed, and frowned. Possibly the conceited fellow may even have imagined from the air of mystery that Lanky assumed when telling him some one wanted to see him, that one of the girls, even Minnie herself, was there with a message.

Frank beckoned to him, earnestly. He saw Lef's face turn red at once, but since no one could ever accuse the fellow of a lack of nerve, it was not strange that he started toward the corner where Frank was standing hiding something behind him.

When Lef reached the other he was sneering as he said:

"Was it *you* sent for me? If I'd known it, I wouldn't have taken the trouble to come, and you understand that, or you wouldn't have had Lanky make me believe it might be Minnie."

Frank flushed a trifle at the mention of that name, for he and Lef had long been competitors for the favor of the prettiest girl in Columbia.

"That would have been too bad, for you, Lef," he said, quietly.

"Oh! say you so. Perhaps you'll take the trouble

to tell me why?" observed the other, apparently as bold as ever, though Frank could detect a little uneasiness about his manner that told of newly awakened fears.

"Because if you hadn't come I'd have taken the matter up with Professor Parke," and Frank looked him straight in the eye as he spoke.

"Matter—what matter?" demanded Lef, shivering at the same time.

Frank stepped aside, and in so doing exposed upon the table one of the little trays used by Mr. Oswald when instructing his pupils in the art of the mapmaker.

"That's your tray, Lef; it has your own signature on the tag to make certain."

"Oh! I don't deny it. But what under the sun are you driving at, Frank Allen? I'm beginning to believe that all the praise that's been showered on the mighty factor in saving that punk game last Saturday has gone to his head, and that you're getting ratty."

"Wait and see. There's the imprint of your left hand as plain as day. You heard me say that no two fingers in the world would make the same impression, or thumbs either for that matter. Well, I'm going to show you that the *same thumb* can and always will make a similar impression; and many a rascal has gone to jail just because of it."

With a quick motion Frank flirted a paper before the astonished eyes of the boy who stood there. Lef turned as white as a ghost, and had to grit his teeth to keep from having them chatter with his sudden fright.

Had the ground opened and threatened to swallow him just then he could hardly have been more astonished and dismayed. It is the feeling of the rogue whenever his own handiwork arises unexpectedly to confront and confound him.

"I guess you know that paper, Lef, all right," said Frank, meaningly.

Lef pretended to lean forward to read it, but in reality he was trying to shield his face until he could screw up a little of his ordinary courage and brazen assurance.

"Rats!" he exclaimed at length, though his voice trembled almost piteously, and instead of the customary fire in his eyes they seemed to be filled with a dumb entreaty; "I see that you've got the paper the professor said came to him. What of it? I ain't got anything to do with that, and nothing you can say will make anybody believe it, Frank Allen!"

"But you signed it yourself, Lef, as plain as day!" declared Frank.

"What's that? Think I'm a fool, do you? Sign nothing! The fellow who wrote that scribble was

wise enough to make only his mark," sneered Lef.

"Well, in this case his mark is as good as his name," went on Frank.

Lef began to tremble. He realized that there was something terrible back of these words, so calmly spoken by the boy he had come to fear more than any one he had ever known.

"Tell me how?" he demanded, with one more futile attempt at bluster.

Frank pointed to the blur on the edge of the sheet, where a thumbmark was plainly visible in ink.

"That's your signature, Lef! You never thought when by accident your thumb made that blur that you were signing your name here, but that's just what you did. The proof lies in that little drawer where you made the impression of your left hand. Alike as two peas they are, Lef. That would convict you in any court. It stamps you as the low, mean cur that you are, who would try to ruin a companion's reputation just to gratify his love of revenge!"

Lef stared at the small tray of moulding clay in which the plain impression of his hands could be seen.

"You—did—that as a trap!" he gasped.

"Well, just as you will. If it was a trap you fell into it neatly enough, and you're caught now. The evidence is there, and if I showed it to Professor

Parke I guess we wouldn't be bothered with you at Columbia High much longer," went on Frank, sternly.

"Say, you wouldn't be mean enough to do that, Allen, I hope? I acknowledge the corn about this thing. I did do it, but more to get you knocked off the baseball team than anything else," said Lef, in pretended humility.

All the while he was edging toward the table; but if Frank suspected his design he took no measures to stop the other.

"What good would that do you?" demanded the one Lef had injured.

"I used to pitch for Columbia, yes, and won many games for them up to the time you knocked me out. I've never got over being sore for that. Lots of times I've tried to get even. You know how. Sometimes I succeeded in giving you a jolt; but more times the shoe was on the other foot. This seems to be one of that sort. I never thought the old man had you with him all the time he was out of his den."

"But you haven't answered my question—how would it profit you even if I was dropped from the team?" continued Frank, persistently.

"Why, I had some hope that when the team was left without a pitcher enough influence might be brought to bear on the Head to let me take my old

place in the box again. That's all I did it for, Frank; I give you my word."

"I suppose you look at such things differently from the way others do; and perhaps you even now believe it wasn't such a dirty trick after all. I'm just wondering whether I'd better accept an apology from you and let it go at that, or take the matter before Professor Parke."

Lef made a sudden movement of his hand, and the little tray was dumped from off the table, depositing its contents in a mass upon the floor.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Frank.

"Destroying the evidence, that's all. I guess you'll have some difficulty now about proving the ridiculous assertion you just made. Of course I never dreamed of playing such a mean trick as stealing that paper, and hiding it on you! And, Mr. Smarty, my word ought to be as good as yours, any day!"

He thrust his face out as he spoke, in his usual disagreeable way, thinking he had played a clever trick on the other.

"You're wrong there. Although you've destroyed that little print you so kindly made me you can't very well get rid of the original so easily," said Frank, pointing down at the left hand of the other.

And Lef fell back in sheer dismay. He had forgotten that it was the mark of his thumb to which Frank referred.

"The professor could easily insist upon you convicting yourself by stamping another thumb-print alongside this one. He asked me if I wanted to have every fellow in Columbia make his mark, so that the right one could be found; and I told him I preferred going about it in my own way."

"Then—he knows?" asked Lef, in new alarm.

"About the imprint on the paper, yes. He admitted that it was a possible way for identifying the one who had taken it out of his desk," was Frank's answer.

"And you've got to tell him then?" with a groan, and a sinking of his head on his chest.

"No, he said he'd leave that to me entirely; but that, if I succeeded, and gave him the proof he'd do the rest!"

Like all cowards caught in their own toils, Lef was not beneath playing upon his emotions in order to secure immunity. To the surprise of Frank the other suddenly grasped his hand and there seemed to be a look of sincere agony on the face that was thrust close to his.

"Then I hope you'll be above giving me away, Frank. I've been a cur. I admit it, and don't deserve to be let down easy; but I'd hate to be expelled from school, because, you know, my mother has set her heart on my graduating, and going to college. It would break her all up. I haven't been

what I ought to be, but this is going to be a lesson to me, sure it is!"

Frank deep down in his heart believed the fellow was a hypocrite; but under the circumstances what could he do, now that Lef had brought his mother into the affair? Frank knew her well, and believed she was an estimable lady who certainly deserved to have a better son than fortune had given her.

"I don't know whether to believe you or not, Lef; but at any rate I guess I'll keep my own counsel, for a while at least," he said.

And as Lef moved away, he was secretly laughing in his heart at the easy way he had tricked his rival.

CHAPTER IX

A STUNNING SURPRISE

"EVERYBODY report on the field this afternoon for practice!" called Lanky.

It was on Friday morning, and most of the members of the nine chanced to be within hearing distance of his shout.

"Bellport will be over here to-morrow, and with their teeth set to drop us down a peg," remarked Jack Eastwick, who, while no ball player of moment, always manifested the greatest interest in the success of the team.

"Hope the weather keeps on as fine as it is to-day," said Tom Budd, as he turned a few flipflaps around the group; but the boys were so accustomed to his antics that they paid little attention to them, although a stranger would have stared with amazement to see his really wonderful stunts.

"And that Frank's arm is as full of ginger as it was last Saturday. My! but he did shoot them in. I heard some of the Bellport players talking about

it after the game. They're afraid of Frank, fellows, actually afraid!"

Lef Seller, who was hanging near, turned his head away to conceal the sneer that persisted in settling upon his face when he heard Buster make this announcement.

It was like gall and wormwood to Lef to hear any one say good things of Frank Allen. Every time this happened it seemed as though he were being robbed of something that by right should belong to him.

When they gathered that afternoon on the diamond, Lef was around to watch and criticise as the humor seized him. And Tony Gilpin also made his appearance, although seldom seen of late on the athletic field.

"No show this afternoon to get it, Lef," he remarked, as he threw himself down near the other on the grass under a tree that grew outside the confines of the grounds.

"Rotten luck! Of course he wouldn't carry it in his baseball uniform. That means we'll have to wait our chance. And till I get my fingers on that paper I don't dare so much as peep for fear that he shows me up," grunted Lef.

From which it may be readily understood that he was even then laying plans looking to another robbery, this time in order to destroy all evidence of

his participation in that other offense. So one crime often leads to another, after the first step has been taken along the broad way.

The boys were soon batting and throwing, while waiting for the arrival of enough fellows to make up the scrub team.

Captain Seymour was a clever manager and he had noticed just where the team had seemed a bit weak during that great game with Bellport. It was now his aim to strengthen those lame spots as best the short time allowed.

Those who had made errors of judgment were to be put through a course whereby they might reasonably remedy that defect. If a fielder had shown wavering in the matter of running in on a fly or backing away, he was to be bombarded with high, vaulting ones until he seemed perfect.

And so it went on. Columbia just then had no regular coach, since the instructor at the school, who had played that benevolent part with them earlier in the season, had been called away by the illness of his father.

"Who's missing?" called Seymour, as he began to pick out his men, and arrange with the captain of the scrub for the opening of a little five-inning game.

"All here but Buster Billings!" announced some one.

"And there he comes toddling along now!" another called out.

"Buster never would hurry if the world was coming to an end," said Lanky.

"You wrong him there. Send a fly out in his territory and see him go. Once he makes a start and he can whoop things up like a wild broncho on the plains. The only trouble with Buster is he can hardly stop after he gets wound up. I saw him knock down a whole section of a board fence once," laughed Frank.

"Who's he got with him?" asked "Bones" Shadduck.

"It's a gentleman stopping at his house. I saw him come last night," one of the boys answered quickly.

"Mr. Billings is having lots of company lately. I met another gentleman at the game last week who said he was visiting at their house," remarked Jack Eastwick.

Buster came puffing up, his face rosy as ever, and a set grin upon it.

"Hello! fellows, a little late, am I? Well, Rome never was built in a day. Plenty of time to do all the practicing we want. And since we're going to have a real hot game of it why I thought I'd bring an umpire along!"

He pointed to the gentleman at his side, who

was smiling as if pleased to be among such a lot of happy-go-lucky young athletes.

"Reminds me of my salad days at Princeton, boys. As George here says I'll be only too glad to prove of any assistance to you, either in the way of umpiring, or giving you a few pointers," the tall man remarked.

Buster threw out his chest, and the light of a long-delayed triumph shone in his eyes as he exclaimed:

"Fellows, allow me to introduce my friend, Coach Willoughby!"

"What!"

More than a dozen pairs of dilated eyes stared first at Buster and then toward the smiling and bowing gentleman with the athletic build, who began throwing off his coat as though anxious to get down to business.

For a long time past Buster had been quoting Coach Willoughby as an authority on all manner of sports in the gymnasium and on the field. By degrees his comrades had grown to look upon this personage as an imaginary party, and it had of late become a regular habit with them to shout every time Buster started to quote what his patron saint would advise under such and such circumstances.

Imagine their amazement, then, to have him not only prove the truth of this wonderful man's ex-

istence, but to actually have him there on their humble athletic field to coach them in their work!

"Hurrah! three cheers for Buster!" whooped Jack Comfort, as though by that means they might in some measure atone for all the indignities they had heaped upon the head of the fat student in times past.

"And three for Coach Willoughby!" echoed Paul Bird, throwing up his catcher's mitt.

They were given with a will, while the object of the attention, Buster, assumed an attitude, and allowed a beautiful smile to light up his good-natured face.

Ralph was to pitch for the scrub. Taken in all there was a pretty good set of players back of him, and Frank knew that he would have to do his best unless the regulars wanted to take chances of being beaten, which would have a demoralizing effect upon the team just at the threshold of their second struggle with Bellport.

Ralph never pitched better. He had that wonderfully elusive ball of his working in a way that deceived the heaviest batters most alarmingly.

Coach Willoughby proved his thorough knowledge of the game right from the start. He gave Paul several little pointers that opened the eyes of the catcher to some of his faults and weak places. More than this, he frequently called the players of

the batting team about him and explained how certain plays could be made with far greater chances for success than by the older methods they were following.

"Sure Coach Willoughby is right up to date," grinned Buster, when one of his mates remarked that the old Princeton player must have kept track of the game ever since leaving college.

When the fourth inning had ended, with just one more to play, for the afternoon was waning, the score was very close, being just five to four, in favor of the regulars, and most of these runs had been the result of errors rather than a weakness on the part of either pitcher.

In this inning Frank put on every ounce of steam he could muster. The result was the complete discomfiture of the enemy, who could not even manage to connect with the ball.

"Fine work, my boy!" complimented the coach and umpire; and Frank blushed, since it must mean something to be spoken to in this way by so old and experienced a Princeton graduate as Coach Willoughby.

Not to be outdone, Ralph, too, exerted himself in this inning. One litle pop fly that was gathered in by the first baseman was the result of his labor; and the scrub team came in, perspiring freely, but grinning with the chase they had given the regulars.

"Columbia High has reason to be proud of possessing two such clever young twirlers as these boys. I'm going to see that game to-morrow, if I have to break an important engagement to do so," declared the gentlemanly umpire, earnestly, as he walked with several of the players through the town on his way to Buster's house.

Buster was apparently the happiest fellow in town. Every time he looked at the sun-burned gentleman he seemed to be saying:

"Maybe you'll believe me now, fellows—maybe you'll listen when I quote my favorite authority. This day has seen my complete revenge, and I'm satisfied!"

"By the way, do we pass the post-office, George?" asked Coach Willoughby; "for you see I forgot to tell them at the office to address me here in care of your father, and there might be an important letter waiting for me."

"We can stop in and see, sir," remarked Frank, eagerly; but Buster did not notice that he was more than ordinarily interested.

"Then let's do so, please, for here is the building. Wait for me boys, or will you come in?" and with Buster and Frank at his heels the old Princeton player pushed through the doors.

He stepped up to the window where Harvey

Brooks waited upon the patrons of the general delivery department.

And then Frank heard him say in a matter of fact tone of voice:

"Anything here for Mr. Pliny Evans Smith?"

"Yes, sir, one letter for you!" came the answer.

The gentleman athlete received it, tore the end off and was speedily devouring the contents. Frank looked at Buster, who turned as red as a turkey gobbler, and then gave a hysterical little gurgle.

The evidence seemed plain that this wonderful Coach Willoughby had been stamped a fraud of the first water!

CHAPTER X

ON THE RIVER ROAD

"HELLO! boys, what's wrong here?"

Coach Willoughby looked first at Buster's glowing and confused face, and then toward Frank's smiling countenance.

Buster simply pointed to the envelope which had fallen to the floor. As the truth broke upon the mind of the other he laughed heartily.

"Out of their own mouths are the wicked conspirators condemned. See what a nice mess you've coaxed me into, George! Here I am apparently unmasked before this fine, mettlesome prize pitcher of yours."

He turned to Frank, and assumed a little more serious look as he continued:

"My name is Willoughby, only that and nothing more. I am a Princeton graduate, and, as you have seen, I've been something of an all-around athlete in my day, too. Recently I have been doing some umpiring in a minor league, and as my wife doesn't

like the idea of seeing my name printed in such a connection I use the one of Pliny Evans Smith. That's all there is to it boys, I assure you."

"You've done wonders for our team this afternoon, sir, and if we only had the benefit of such advice oftener it would be greatly to our benefit," declared Frank.

"Thank you for the compliment, my lad. My heart is always with the boys, and I believe I'd stop to witness a good game of ball even though it threatened to cost me a slice of my fortune. And Frank, once upon a time I *was* a pitcher; even if I did go to the well once too often," the visitor laughed.

"I wish you had shown me a few more tricks about pitching, Mr. Willoughby," said Frank.

"Oh! I will, gladly," said the ex-Princeton man, readily enough, "although most of the games I knew have been outlawed by time."

Some of the girls were playing basket-ball upon the school green. The sight appealed to Coach Willoughby, and he expressed a wish to stop over a brief time to witness the conclusion of the fiercely-contested game.

Among the rest, Helen Allen and Minnie Cuthbert were doing pretty good work for the side they happened to be on.

The visitor applauded certain plays, and almost before any one knew it he was suggesting others

that opened the eyes of the girls to the fact that they had an authority on sports with them.

So Buster was called upon to introduce his father's friend, and for half an hour Coach Willoughby entered into a free lecture of advice connected with the fascinating exercise of basket-ball.

And when finally the lesson came to an end, Frank walked down the street with both the girls, nor did he turn in at his own gate, but continued on until Minnie had been safely escorted to her home.

He was conscious of the fact that Lef Seller saw him, for they met face to face; but Lef assumed a pleasant look and acted as though he was the last fellow in Columbia to think of bearing malice.

If Frank could have seen how he pounded the pillows about when once safe up in his own room at home, muttering wild threats as to what he would do sooner or later to the fellow who had cut him out of all the good things in life, he might not have whistled so cheerily as he hurried back home for supper.

It was the night before the big battle with Bellport on the home grounds of Columbia High. The whole town seethed with anticipation of what the following afternoon might bring forth. Hundreds of anxious eyes scanned the bright heavens, and tried to predict the weather that was to be meted out to them.

Even the girls were adding their prayers to the clerk of the weather so that he would grant them a fine day like the preceding Saturday had been. There was so very much at stake in connection with that game. If Columbia won, the championship pennant was theirs for the year; if she lost, then another game must be played to decide the matter, thus prolonging the agony a whole week!

There was to be no more practice in the morning, for Seymour believed his men were all in apple-pie condition, and that too much work might make them "go stale."

Hence they would be allowed to do whatever they pleased during the morning, providing every one turned out at three sharp in the afternoon, for the game was to begin at three-thirty.

It was in the morning that Frank appeared at the house where Ralph boarded. The other saw him far down the street, and was out on the stoop by the time Frank arrived. He looked eagerly at the visitor, as though a hope had flashed into his mind that the other brought news.

"How are you feeling this morning, Ralph? How's that arm? Hope you didn't try it out too hard yesterday afternoon. There's no telling, you know, and perhaps you might be called on to do your duty to old Columbia to-day."

Ralph looked at his friend, and his eyes began to show anxiety.

"Oh! I hope you're not going to say something has happened to knock you out, and this such an important game, too?" he exclaimed.

"Now I should have known that you'd jump to such a conclusion, and it was silly of me to put it that way. No, there's not the slightest thing the matter with me that I know of, Ralph. My arm feels just fine, and I think I'm fit to pitch the game of my life; but as they say, you can't most always sometimes tell. Perhaps they may knock me out of the box to-day," laughed Frank.

"I don't believe it can be done," declared Ralph. "Why, there were only three clean hits made off you last week; and from the way you put them in yesterday, I firmly believe you're ten per cent stronger now than you were a week ago."

"But they may have gauged my delivery then, and be on to most of my little tricks, you see. Besides, I heard that during the week they have had that Clifford pitcher, Gus Hartigan, tossing them up every p. m., and our boys say that he is a ringer for a certain Frank Allen in his style of delivery."

Ralph looked surprised at hearing this. Nevertheless he would not confess that he entertained the least doubt about the ability of the boy he ad-

mired to make the heavy batters of Bellport "look small."

"I only hope nothing happens to make me break into that game. I'm afraid that I'm too green as yet to go up against such seasoned veterans as those fellows," he observed, with a shake of the head to emphasize his fears.

"You're too modest, old fellow, by half. Don't you call our regular nine just as well seasoned, and didn't you hold us down to five hits yesterday, and one of those a base scratch? I'd just like to see those hustling batters from the smoky town breaking their backs trying to get up against that fine healthy ball you throw, that's all," and Frank felt of the muscle in the arm of his comrade, at the same time raising his eyes as if in wonder.

"But you didn't come here to tell me just that, Frank?" continued Ralph! "there's something more, isn't there?"

"Why, yes, to tell the truth, I wanted to have a quiet little chat with you."

"All right. Will you come up to my room?" eagerly asked Ralph.

"I hate to stay indoors this beautiful June morning. Get your cap and let's walk out along the river road. We can be alone there, and at the same time enjoy what both of us love—Nature."

"All right, Frank. Wait up just a minute, will you?"

In a short time they had left the confines of the town behind them, and found themselves under the trees along a favorite drive that followed the course of the picturesque Harrapin river.

The spring rains had come rather late, and the water was unusually high for the time of year. It was boiling along at quite a merry pace, gurgling, and in some places creating quite a furore.

"Now, what was it you wanted to tell me, Frank?" asked Ralph, when they had been walking briskly along for a mile or so, with Frank so busied in his thoughts that he had apparently quite forgotten the real reason for their morning exercise.

"Why, to be sure. Excuse me for seeming to neglect it so, old fellow. Truth is, I was bothering my head over a personal matter, and wondering what influence that fellow Lef Seller could bring to bear that would ever induce Minnie to go out riding with him; for I saw them start off as I was on the way to your house."

Frank possibly turned a bit red as he spoke; but then every one knew just how much he thought of Minnie; and it had stabbed him to the quick to see her seated in that fine vehicle of the Sellers, with the grinning Lef at her side.

Cudgel his brain as he would, Frank could re-

member no cause he had given her for treating him this way. They had parted on the preceding evening with a laugh, and Minnie had seemed just as much pleased to be in his society as ever. And yet she had bowed to him rather frigidly, he thought, as he met them; while Lef could not for the life of him restrain that contemptuous grin.

Ralph understood. They must have driven up the river road, then. That, in a measure, would explain just why Frank chose to walk that way. Upon the freshman's face a look of real sympathy gathered; but he was too wise to attempt to express it in words.

"I can see the tricky hand of that Lef Seller somewhere back of this thing, and you can bet he's said something or other to set her against you, Frank," he did manage to remark.

"I wonder if he would dare, knowing that I can break him if I choose," muttered Frank, as he mechanically put his hand into his inner coat pocket.

Then he began to feel more hastily, a look of concern coming over his face. By the time he had covered every pocket in his garments he smiled grimly.

"Well, a fellow has to get up bright and early in the morning to keep ahead of that cunning old fox!" he said, bitterly.

"What's the matter, Frank?" demanded his com-

panion, who had been surveying his actions with wonder written all over his face.

"I had something that seems to have taken wings and flown away, that's all."

"But you act as though it concerned Lef," Ralph kept on.

"It did, though I don't doubt that he's burned the paper before now. Just how it was taken bewilders me. I was out last night, yes, and in a bunch of fellows at the class meeting. You know we're getting up something of a surprise on the seniors, in the shape of the annual supper and dance which the juniors give to the graduating class. Lef was there, but he avoided me all night. The only fellow I could suspect would be that sneak, Asa Barnes, who semed to want to be unusually confidential with me. And doubtless he swiped the paper at some time when I wasn't paying much attention; for I've been told that he can play all the sleight of hand tricks of a magician."

"Paper—you keep saying that, and I don't understand?" expostulated Ralph.

"No more you do, Ralph. And I'm going to tell you now, only it's to be a dead secret between us."

"I'll never repeat a word of it without your permission," remarked Ralph; at the same time thinking how strange it was that his companion kept

pushing this matter forward ahead of the affair that concerned him, Ralph, so deeply.

"You remember Professor Parke telling about the anonymous note he received?"

"Why, of course; and is that the paper you mean? What were you keeping it for, and why should Lef want to get hold of it?" asked Ralph, quickly.

"Oh! you're a litle too rapid. Listen. On that paper was a little blur. I made it out to be the mark of some one's left thumb, and the professor agreed with me."

"What! did that have anything to do with what you were telling us Thursday afternoon in the gym about finger prints, and all that stuff?" flashed the astonished freshman.

"Everything to do with it, since that was only a little dodge of mine to get Lef Seller to make a plain impression of his left thumb. And, Ralph, it corresponded exactly with the mark on the paper!"

"Well, I declare, you do wonderful things, Frank! I never heard of anything quite so clever as that. Did you accuse him of it when he went in the lunch room?"

"Yes. Of course he denied it first. Then I told him how I knew. He knocked the tray that carried the imprint of his hands, on the floor, and defied me; but I simply stated that he could be made to

show the print of his thumb at any time by the Head!"

"Good! What did he do then?" continued the eager Ralph.

"Knuckled down and pleaded with me not to give him away. Promised to turn over a new leaf and all that," said Frank, shrugging his shoulders.

"But you surely didn't believe him?"

"No, but you see I couldn't find it in me to tell on him, as it would mean his being expelled. But Lef knew that he was in my power just so long as I held that paper with the thumb-print on it."

"I see. And, slippery customer that he is, he hired that other scamp to steal it out of your pocket. That was an easy thing for Asa to do, if all they say about his palming is true. Then it's gone, as you say!" dolefully remarked Ralph.

"It seems so. And that accounts for his perky airs this morning. He was laughing at me, partly because he felt he could snap his finger in my face, and then because Minnie had gone riding with him. Oh! well, I'm not going to bother my head about Lef Seller and his evil fortunes. If Minnie—but the least said about that the soonest mended, I guess," and Frank closed his lips resolutely.

"Then perhaps you won't mind going back to my affairs again, eh?" insinuated the freshman.

"I declare I must ask you to forgive me again,

Ralph, for being so neglectful of your interests. I only wanted to see you to say that father has heard from Uncle Jim, and that he writes he is coming up here to Columbia and will see you personally. Uncle Jim also says that——"

But what the New York lawyer wrote was fated not to reach the ears of the party so deeply interested, just then at any rate. A scream smote the air, coming from some point around the nearest bend of the river road, and accompanying this the boys heard a wild voice, and the confused trample of a horse's hoofs!

CHAPTER XI

A TIME FOR QUICK THINKING

"WHAT is that, Frank?" cried Ralph, in excitement.

"Sounds like a horse running away!" replied the other.

Ralph saw his comrade's face turn ashy white. Then he remembered something Frank had said only a short time before.

"Oh! what if it is Lef's horse!"

Frank only groaned, and shut his teeth hard together. But at the same time he started to run forward. He had only taken half a dozen paces, when something shot around the bend.

"There it is, Frank!" shouted Ralph, ready to do anything in his power to assist his friend, yet hardly knowing just what to attempt first.

He thought of swinging his arms above his head wildly, of waving his hat, as he had read of cowboys doing when they wished to turn runaway steers; but then the river road at this point was nar-

row, and if the frightened animal ever swerved, it was almost certain to topple over into the water, which was both deep and swift.

"It's them—Lef and Minnie!"

The white lips of Frank formed these words as he still staggered onward, though there was little need of this. Surely the plunging horse, mad with terror, would reach him before he could take half a dozen breaths.

What could he do to bring the beast to a halt? He saw Lef half standing up and sawing wildly at the lines, dragging the horse's head from side to side with the energy of his action. But what almost froze the blood in Frank's veins was the sight of that pitiable, shrinking figure cowering down in the seat just behind.

How well he remembered that bright red dress. He had thought the girl never looked so pretty as the day she first wore that; and he mustered up courage enough to tell her so, too. And now—Frank gulped something down that threatened to choke him, and tried to set his muscles for a mad spring when the runaway horse came up with him.

"Get out of the way! You'll scare him into the river!" howled the badly-rattled Lef, as he continued to saw away at the lines as if for dear life.

That was just what Frank thought would be the best thing that could happen. As it was, an upset

might cost one or both lives, if the occupants of the swaying vehicle were hurled upon the rocks at the side of the road.

Instead of getting out of the way, as Lef seemed to want, he stood as if rooted there. He even did more, for he snatched off his hat and waved it in order to make the horse sheer.

"Stop that, you fool!"

Lef fairly shrieked these words. He evidently thought Frank had taken leave of his senses, and would bring about a disaster. On the contrary, the boy in the road had calculated wisely, and saw that there was a chance of bringing that wild race to a halt without a terrible smash.

It turned out exactly as Frank had figured. The animal, startled at seeing this figure in the middle of the road, with wildly waving arms, and uttering hoarse shouts, jumped to one side.

There was the hill to the right, and hence the only way in which the beast could leave the road was in the direction of the river.

It lay close to the thoroughfare at this point; indeed, passersby had always been in the habit of pulling up right there to admire the magnificent view up and down the romantic looking stream.

Horse and vehicle shot over the bank, and with a terrific splash vanished in the swirling water. It seemed too bad that necessity compelled the sacri-

HE WAVED HIS HAT IN ORDER TO MAKE THE HORSE SHEER.

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knew must be the imperiled girl. Her dress seemed to be helping her to keep afloat, though this would only last for a minute or so, when it must become soaked, and serve to drag her down.

The water was very deep at this point. Moreover, the current had a full swing, and swept along rapidly. On the other hand, fortunately, Minnie was only a comparatively few yards away from the shore, so that the boy did not have to cover any great distance before reaching her.

As he swam Frank was shouting hoarsely, his strained eyes fastened upon the object of his intense solicitude.

"Keep it up, Minnie! Fight hard! I'm coming to you! It's all right!" was the burden of his encouraging cries.

Then he reached her, and began to tow her toward the bank. The girl was almost hysterical with fright, so that Frank was put to it to avoid having her arms wrapped about his neck. Dragging her thus, and all the time trying to soothe her by encouraging words, he gained foot after foot.

"Here! this way, Frank!"

Ralph had waded into the water until it was up to his waist. He also held out a stout stick he had snatched from the ground. And when the fingers of the swimmer closed upon the knob at the end of this friendly club he knew it was over.

In another minute he had emerged from the water, still holding fast to the form of Minnie. But the girl did not faint. Far from it; she was now filled with indignation toward the wretched Lef, who had been drawn out of the river by the horse, and was even then dripping on the low shore. The subdued animal made no effort to continue his mad flight; the cold water had taken all this desire out of him, and he looked about as dejected as his master.

Frank was immediately engaged trying to wring some of the water out of the girl's skirt, and at the same time seeking to cheer her up, for she was now sobbing hysterically after her recent double fright.

Lef, finding that his horse would stand, now pushed toward the group. His teeth still chattered, more from recent fear than anything else. At the same time he was full of anger toward Frank, who had as usual been on the spot to win the laurels while the husks came his way.

"What did you do that for? The whole thing's your fault, Frank Allen! Minnie can blame you for her ducking; and you might have cost one of us a life. I believe you did it just to have a chance to play the hero part you're so fond of!"

So Lef sputtered as he shook his hand in front of Frank's face.

The stooping boy looked up. There was a smouldering fire in his own eyes, for he believed that only for the cowardly nature of Lef and his inability to manage the horse this thing need not have occurred.

"Look there, *you!*" he said, sternly, pointing down the road.

Lef, looking, saw a furniture van coming along. It took the entire width of the narrow river road, and was at a spot where cruel rocks abounded on either side.

"You must have met that thing. The horse would have dashed to one side, and the buggy been overturned among those rocks. And you can understand what must have followed. That's why I made him shy! I knew it was ten times safer for you both to be dragged into the river than thrown out down the road!"

Lef was mute with horror. He realized that this quick-witted boy had sized up the situation in a second, and acted promptly.

After all, there was no damage done save to their ruffled feelings, and Minnie's lovely red dress. But the girl would not speak to Lef, even when he asked her if she would get into the vehicle again.

"Frank, you'll walk home with me, won't you?" she said, turning to him, with the same old glow in her blue eyes.

"Only be too glad; and besides, I think the exer-

cise would be the best thing for you after your ducking. Ta! ta! Lef. The next time you ask a girl to go out riding be sure you take a horse you can manage."

Lef could not make any reply. He was too full of anger to speak, and turning away he went back to his horse. After the furniture van had passed he jumped in and sped the animal, now tractable enough, down the road. The three pedestrians stepped aside to let him pass; but not a word was said, although Ralph did wave a hand mockingly after him, as if speeding his homeward flight.

"What caused the runaway, Minnie?" asked Frank, as they walked on, after Ralph had secured Frank's coat and shoes, the warm sunshine and air rapidly drying the water-soaked garments of the party.

"I really hardly know. Something I said must have made Lef angry, for he began to whip the horse unmercifully, although I told him it was cruel. We had turned to come back, you see. Oh! I was so frightened! I'll never go riding with him again. I only hope my mother will never know," she said, entreatingly.

"She won't from me, and I can answer for Ralph here," said Frank, promptly.

Half an hour later the boys parted from Minnie and turned toward Frank's house.

"What's the matter with your arm, Frank?" asked Ralph, who had been noticing that the other kept feeling of it every now and then.

"I'm afraid I bruised it against a rock when I jumped in; and, hang the luck, of course it happens to be my pitching wing. You may have to get in that box to-day, after all, Ralph, and fight for the glory of Old Columbia," the other said, soberly.

CHAPTER XII

THE OLD PRINCETONIAN'S ADVICE

"Oh! I hope not!" exclaimed Ralph, in dismay, as he eagerly pounced on the arm Frank had been rubbing.

"Come in with me, and I'll see what some liniment can do for it," remarked the other, calmly; but it was evident from his manner that he believed there might be something more serious the matter than a slight bruise.

When Frank had stripped, so that his arm could be examined, it was found that he had a nasty black and blue mark as a result of coming in contact with a rock in his impetuous dash into the river.

"The worst of it is that the muscle is affected. Every time I close my hand it causes intense pain. I couldn't do that hundreds of times during the afternoon. Ralph, it's positively up to you to-day!" he said, finally.

Ralph sighed deeply.

"I'm awful sorry. Not that I won't do my level

best to take your place; but only for this I believe we would have won that pennant to-day. It's fortunate there's another game to follow," he said, trying to cheer up.

"We'll get this game, all right, don't worry about that. Before the sun goes down perhaps every fellow will be shouting the praise of the new pitcher. I'm just anxious to see those Bellport batters try to size up that spit ball of yours."

"That's mighty white of you to say so, Frank. And you can depend on it I'll do my level best," returned the other, firmly.

"No fellow can do more. And now, suppose we return once more to that affair of yours. Twice we were interrupted when I started in to tell you," and Frank pushed his guest down into a comfortable sleepy-hollow chair.

"Oh! yes. Do you know I'd forgotten that entirely, with so much other excitement going on. You said your uncle wrote he intended paying your folks a visit soon, and would meet me. I hope he makes up his mind to tell me all he knows. It means everything to me, you see," returned Ralph.

"I intend to make him tell. He just can't go back to the city again without letting either father or else myself know all he does. But perhaps that may not amount to much after all, Ralph."

"What do you mean, Frank?"

"Why, you see, perhaps this mysterious person who wants to do you some good, and yet hide his, or her, light under a bushel, may have taken measures to send the money each end of a month to my uncle, and that he doesn't know himself who really hands it over to him," Frank continued; for he feared that his friend might allow his hopes to soar too high, only to meet with grievous disappointment.

Ralph sighed and shook his head.

"I see what you mean, and I'll try not to be too sanguine. But I do hope something will come up soon to relieve this awful suspense. And now I want to forget all about that, and remember only the game—and Columbia High!"

"Good boy, Ralph! You're made of the right stuff. And never let it occur to you once that we're going to lose this game, no matter if the score is five to one at the end of the seventh inning. Depend on the boys to do their part in slamming out the ball, while you pitch steadily away like a machine."

Ralph soon took his departure.

The news would soon creep around Columbia, and many of the enthusiastic supporters of the school team must feel a quiver of apprehension when they learned that reliable Frank Allen could not pitch that afternoon.

His enemies would crow over the fact. Doubtless some of them, inspired by the malicious tongues of Lef and his cronies, might even whisper that Frank had been overtaken with a case of "cold feet," and shirked his duty.

Ralph went straight to the home of Paul Bird.

The morning was still young and there would be plenty of time for the new battery to practice together, and arrange all needed signals. Ralph had not as yet played a regular game with Paul behind the plate, so that it was necessary they should come together, since so much depended on their acting in concert.

As it happened, Buster was out walking with the visitor at his house, and seeing a couple of boys hard at work in a lot, they drew near. To his surprise he discovered that it was Ralph and Paul.

"Here, what does this secret work mean? Going to spring a surprise on the enemy when they show up this p. m.?" he demanded.

"Then you haven't heard?" asked Paul, eagerly.

"About what? Goodness gracious! don't go telling me that anything's happened to Frank!" ejaculated Buster.

"He won't be able to pitch this afternoon, and Ralph has to go in. That's why we are tossing a few here, so as to get in touch," replied the catcher.

"What happened? Has Frank fallen sick? Did

he get waylaid last night on the road home from the meeting. I've known pitchers to be pounded in order to keep them out of a game. Tell me, won't you, fellows? I'm quivering like a bowl of jelly with eagerness. This *is* a nasty mess."

"Oh! I don't know," returned Paul, with a smile at Buster's anxiety, and the look of grief on his red face, "it might be worse. Frank's a dandy pitcher, but I guess he has little on Ralph here. If he gets that spit ball of his working right it's going to be one, two, three for Bellport."

"But is Frank hurt; I must know?" insisted the other.

"He got a bruise on his arm this morning while we were out walking. Nothing serious, but it interferes with his muscles when he grips a ball. He is going to be on the field, and if they knock me out of the box, why, Frank will have to go in, no matter how he feels. But I hope it won't be so bad as that," smiled Ralph.

"Well, suppose you let my friend, Coach Willoughby, give you a few pointers that may be useful. He's seen a lot of pitchers in his time, and used to throw them in for the Tiger once himself," suggested Buster.

"Oh! if he only would, I'd be ever so much obliged. You see, Mr. Willoughby, I'm only a ten-

derfoot at this thing, and I've got heaps to learn!" cried Ralph.

"No doubt of that, my lad, but if yesterday's performance is a fair sample of your ability to puzzle the batter, I rather think you'll have some of these heavy Bellport hitters knocking holes out of the atmosphere this afternoon. What you need fear most of all is lack of confidence. Get it in your head that you *can* do a thing, and that you're just *going* to do it, and nine times out of ten you *will* do it."

And then the old Princeton "grad" began to put the young battery through a course of instruction that delighted their hearts. He even took a turn in the box himself and sent some sizzling hot ones down that rather staggered Paul.

"You may be a 'has-been' as you say, sir, but I wouldn't like to stand up before you if you were in your prime," remarked the catcher, as he blocked a ball that nearly took him off his feet.

"Thank you, Paul. That's as sincere a compliment as I ever received. And now, Ralph, one more turn here in the box and I think you will have exercised that wing of yours quite enough for this morning. Be careful of it, so that you don't take cold between now and ball time. I'm satisfied that the good people of Columbia will see a game worth the price to-day."

Ralph felt ten per cent. better after having this

talk and work with the veteran player. He knew that he could carry out his end of the arrangement if he only managed to keep up his courage and confidence.

So it was in that frame of mind he ate his lunch, and later on dressed for the expected game.

Although it was hardly yet half-past two o'clock, a steady stream of people had commenced to pour out in the direction of the big field where the Columbia sports were carried on, from baseball and running, to football in the autumn.

This level tract was at a considerable distance from the town. Being between Columbia proper and the town of Bellport down the river, it could be reached by the trolley, or vehicles. As many people did not care to ride, and the walking was good, the mile of road was covered with pedestrians, many of them boys in squads, all earnestly discussing the coming contest, and the chances of victory.

Hundreds were also pouring into the place from Clifford above. Cheated out of a show in the contest by a perverse fate, the fans of that town were just as anxious to see which of their rivals would come out ahead in the series.

Ralph was a very modest boy. He purposely took a roundabout course to the ball field, when starting forth, as he wished to avoid meeting with

the crowds that thronged the trolley cars and the main road.

He knew he could easily make the grounds in good time, though his detour would cause him to pass over two miles instead of one. And just then Ralph really wanted to have a little more time by himself to brace up for the exciting event that was before him.

So, making a turn, he walked through the woods. The smell of the cool, shady spots under the trees seemed to soothe his nerves, and he was rapidly getting the firm grip on himself that he wanted, and which would be so essential to the success of his contemplated work.

He had no thought of anything happening to detain him on the way. Frank might have enemies bitter enough to attempt such mean tactics, but thus far Ralph did not know of any person who would have an object in keeping him out of the game, unless it might be that undesirable character, Watkins Gould, who staked his money on Bellport that other day, and lost.

So Ralph had covered about half of the distance, and was aiming for a spot where, emerging from the thick woods, he knew he could strike a road leading directly to the athletic field.

"What was that?" he asked himself, suddenly stopping in his quick walk, for he thought he had

caught a sound not unlike the sobbing of a child.

It seemed to well up from the thicket on his right. Perhaps Ralph may have had one fleeting suspicion that there could be a trick connected with the matter; but when he heard the piteous cry a second time he plunged straight toward the spot.

CHAPTER XIII

LED BY A KINDLY FATE

"WELL, I declare!"

Ralph West stood rooted to the spot for a couple of seconds, as he allowed this exclamation to escape from his lips.

Perhaps he had half expected to have a couple of fellows pounce upon him as he pushed the branches aside; which would account for the manner in which his fists were clenched, and his teeth set.

What he saw was an entirely different spectacle. A little girl was seated on a hummock, rocking to and fro, with her childish face tear-stained, and full of bodily anguish.

The blood upon her hand told that she must have fallen and hurt herself badly. No doubt it was the sight of the blood that frightened her even more than the pain.

Ralph sprang forward, and the tear-stained face was turned up to him eagerly.

"What's happened to you, little one?" asked the boy, as he bent down.

Already had he taken a clean handkerchief out, and shaken it from its folds. Thank goodness he had supplied himself liberally, with a hot game before him. Picking up the mangled hand, he saw that it was in need of immediate attention, as possibly a heavy rock had fallen on the fingers.

Ralph began to tenderly wrap his handkerchief about the torn fingers, at the same time speaking soothingly to the child. She had ceased crying and was looking at him wonderingly. Doubtless his baseball uniform astonished her greatly.

"It fell on me," she managed to say, pointing to something near by; and Ralph saw that his surmise had been correct in so far as it concerned a stone.

"But what are you doing here; where do you live?" he asked, anxiously.

The child should not be left here in these woods with so serious a wound as the crushed fingers would likely prove. And yet his time was not wholly his own, since he must be on the field presently in order to practice before the calling of the great game.

"I'm Mary Smalling," said the child, with utmost confidence and simplicity, as if every one ought to know after that.

Ralph had caught sight of a dinner pail on the ground near by. It was empty, too, which fact gave

him the impression that the little girl might have been on the way home after carrying a noonday meal to her father.

He had an indistinct recollection of hearing the name before. Perhaps it was in connection with a new family that had come to live on the outskirts of the town; but just then in his confusion of ideas he could not for the life of him tell whether it had been on the other side along the river road, or to the west.

"Where does your father work?" he asked, on a hazard.

"For Mr. Gregg," came the immediate answer.

"At the mill, the flour mill?" asked the boy, quickly.

A nod of the little auburn-crowned head answered him. Then Ralph knew what his duty was. He remembered that the mill was only a quarter of a mile away from the spot where they were at that moment. Perhaps the child's home might be even closer, but he could not take the chances of hunting for it.

"I'm going to carry you to your father, Mary. You're not afraid of me, are you?" he asked, bending down again; for some one ought to get her to a doctor without much delay, so that it might be discovered whether any bones had been broken by the cruel fall of that heavy stone.

"Me? Oh! no," she said, instantly, which pleased Ralph more than he cared to say, for it told him his manner had inspired confidence in the little maid.

So he gathered the wee mite of humanity up in his arms, and having decided upon which direction he should take, strode off.

"But—my dinner pail! Daddy won't like me to lose it!" wailed the child, after they had gone fifty paces.

Nothing would do but that Ralph must return in order that she might clutch it in her one well hand. Then again he made a start. It was provoking that an accident like this should delay him just when minutes were of so much value. But Ralph could not have had the heart to leave that innocent child crying there alone in those dense woods even though a dozen ball games depended on his showing up at a certain time.

The little one proved more of a load than he had anticipated. Several times he would have been glad of a chance to rest and put her down; but the passage of time kept staring him in the face.

Ralph hoped that this encounter would not prove to be his undoing. He had grave fears that the strain of carrying the child so great a distance might shake his nerves in a way he would feel to his disadvantage during the progress of the game.

Little did the boy realize how a benevolent fortune was playing directly into his hands, and that the very thing he feared might be a calamity was fated to be but another stepping stone on the road to good luck.

The little girl had stopped crying. He could see her bright eyes looking up into his face every time he glanced down. As he staggered along Ralph kept talking in his cheery way, and no doubt that had considerable to do with her appearance of contentment.

At last, when Ralph feared he could hold out no longer, he heard the familiar whirr of the big water wheel, and caught a glimpse of the mill through openings in the trees.

"We're almost there, Mary, and you will soon be with your father," he said, smiling down at her.

"That will be nice. I'm glad you came," the child answered; and Ralph believed there was enough of genuine gratitude in those simple words to repay him doubly for all his trouble.

All he begrudged was the time it had taken. Only for that he would not have cared had the distance been thrice as long, for it was certainly a pleasure for this lad to do a service to a helpless little creature in trouble.

He reached the road over which the supplies of the flour mill were carried, as well as the milled

product hauled away. It was easier going now.

"There's my daddy!" exclaimed Mary, struggling up in his arms.

Her voice must have reached the ears of a man who was working just outside the door of the mill, for he turned hastily and looked toward them. A moment later and he started on a run toward Ralph.

The boy could see that his face betokened alarm. It was not exactly a bad face, though there were the marks of dissipation upon it, showing that Mary's father had not always led the best sort of a life.

"What's the matter. What's happened to the child?" he cried, hoarsely, as he came closer to the boy, who had stopped in his tracks now.

"Anyhow, he loves the little girl, that's sure," thought Ralph, as he saw the look of agony that made the man's face turn white.

"She's hurt her hand quite badly. I think a rock must have fallen on it while she was picking wild flowers, or reaching into the burrow of a chipmunk. Be careful, sir, it's bleeding a lot," said Ralph, as the man took her from his arms.

"But I didn't lose the bucket, daddy, like you said I would!" cried the child, still gripping the tin tightly.

"Never mind the bucket, darling; it's your hand

I'm thinking about now. Where did you find her, my boy?" asked the man, eagerly.

Ralph was almost panting after his long and tiresome walk, burdened as he had been. He was only waiting to get his breath, so as to say that the little girl ought to be taken to a doctor without delay, and then expected to start in a hurry for the athletic field.

"About a quarter of a mile from here, and in the woods. I think she must have been on the way home. I was taking a roundabout way to the baseball field, you see, where I have to pitch a game for Columbia this afternoon," Ralph explained, seeing the man look inquiringly at his suit.

"And you turned out of your way to carry my child all the way here! It was kind of you to do that, my boy, and I won't forget it in a hurry. This girlie is everything in the world to me, I tell you. Thank you a thousand times for your trouble, and any time Sam Smalling can do anything to return the favor you just call on him, hear?" and he squeezed Ralph's hand with emphasis.

"Oh! that's all right. I wouldn't have minded it a bit, only I was afraid I might be late for the game," said Ralph, preparing to go.

"And everything depends on the pitcher, I know. That makes it all the kinder of you, turning aside as you did. I hope you'll stop in and see us some

time, my boy. We live in the Grant cottage, on the road to Menhaven. The girl will be glad to see you, and her mother, too, I wager."

"I'll try to, some time later. But I hope you can get her in to town to let a doctor look at those fingers without delay. If a bone is broken it ought to be set, you know," said Ralph, over his shoulder, for he had started off.

"Hold on a minute, my boy. There's our wagon and horse right handy. I'll speak to the boss, and take the rig to drive to town right away. And by jumping in you can get to the baseball grounds quicker than if you walk; besides having a little rest. Wait up a minute. You haven't told me your name, either, you see."

Halted by these words from the father of Mary, Ralph turned on his heel. He saw that what the other had said was true, and that by waiting a bit he could ride with advantage to himself.

"I guess that's a fact, and if you're going right away I'll hang on behind. To tell the truth, I'm a little mixed up in my bearings, and might get lost if I went without a guide. You see, I've only lived about here since last fall. My name's Ralph West! Why, what's the matter, sir?" for the man had started back while he was speaking, and stared at him as if suddenly given a shock.

"Ralph West? Do you mean to tell me that *you*

are the boy, then? And that some fatality has brought *you* to do a favor for me and mine? This is the last straw on the camel's back. I was weakening before; now I don't see how I can hold out!"

And hearing these muttered words, Ralph realized with a thrill that Sam Smalling, the father of the child he had assisted, must know something about his mysterious past!

CHAPTER XIV

SAM SMALLING MAKES A PROMISE

For the time being Ralph forgot all about the fact that he was nearly due on the baseball field that afternoon. Sam Smalling's words seemed to indicate that he might be in possession of some knowledge concerning the things which the boy was fairly wild to know.

"Oh! what do you mean?" he asked, in trembling tones, as he came back to clutch the sleeve of the man's shirt eagerly, and fasten a pair of anxious eyes on his face.

Smalling was visibly shaken. He tried to avoid the gaze of Ralph at first, and looked down at his feet in the manner of a man whose sins had suddenly arisen to confound him.

"You must know something about me, Mr. Smalling, or you wouldn't have said what you did. I've only recently learned that I was adopted by the people I've always believed to be my own parents; and ever since that time I've been just wild to learn who I am. Do you know?" demanded Ralph.

The other moved uneasily, and his rather shifty eyes still refused to meet the penetrating gaze of the boy.

"Mebbe I do, and again mebbe I don't. Come and see me again, boy, and perhaps I can help you find out what you want," he muttered, with a shake of the head, as if not wholly satisfied to speak more plainly off-hand.

"But why not now? Oh! if you only knew how I lie awake nights wondering and wishing, I'm sure you'd tell me all you know, sir. It's a terrible thing to be ignorant of who you are! No matter what my parents may have been, I'd rather know than keep on this way. Please tell me!" Ralph pleaded.

"Not just now. It comes on me too sudden like. I must have time to think it over and see just where I stand. There's more than one thing to be considered. But I'll tell you this, Ralph, after what you've done for my little girl to-day I'm mighty much inclined to break my word, and speak soon."

"Then I suppose I'll just have to wait, Mr. Smalling; but I do hope you'll not be too long. When can I come to see you about it, sir?" Ralph went on, meaning to strike while the iron was hot.

"Come to-night, then. And I reckon you can expect to hear something that will do you good. But we must get off now. I'm anxious to get Mary to town, so a doctor can look after her hand; and as

for you, the sooner you drop in on that baseball game the better, I reckon," said the man, hurrying over to where the owner of the flour mill seemed to be working.

Then Ralph remembered that his time was not his own—that there would by now be a tremendous crowd assembled on the athletic grounds, watching the snappy work of the rival teams, and his absence must be causing the Columbia High players considerable anxiety, to say the least.

Some of the spectators, who happened to know that Ralph was slated to go in the box in place of Frank Allen, would even be cruel enough to declare that the novice must have been attacked with a case of stage fright, and retreated from the grounds after seeing the immense throng which he would have to face.

So Ralph tried to forget all his personal affairs for the time being, and think only of his duty toward his school.

Now that she had found her father again, Mary seemed to be satisfied. Ralph used another spare handkerchief to make a loop in which the injured hand could be suspended; and the little girl thanked him with her bright eyes.

By the time this had been done Smalling came up with the team. Ralph lifted the girl to the seat beside her father.

"Come up here with us; plenty of room, Ralph," said the man; and seeing that he spoke truly, Ralph hastened to comply, although he had been about to swing himself up behind, with his feet dangling over the tailboard.

Consulting his watch, a little nickel affair costing but one dollar, he discovered that he should have been on the field before this. The rescue of Mary, and carrying her all this way, had consumed considerable time.

Smalling urged the horses to do their best. He was naturally anxious about his child, and, moreover, knew that minutes were exceedingly precious to the boy who had stepped aside to do this kindly act.

"I reckon you won't be sorry for what you did, boy," he said, turning his head as they pushed forward over the country road.

His words gave Ralph the keenest sort of satisfaction. He was thrilled with the thought of how his good star must have been in the ascendent when it urged him to investigate the meaning of those apparent sobs in the bushes.

"And to think how near I came to passing by, thinking it might only be some fellow trying to trick me," was what Ralph was saying to himself all the while.

The man who drove seemed to be consumed with

a desire to learn something more about the other, for he began to ask questions.

"Did the old folks treat you white, Ralph?" was his first demand.

"If you mean Mr. and Mrs. West," replied the other, quickly, "I can say yes, perhaps far better than I deserved, since I was none of their flesh and blood. I think I've always looked on them just as other boys do their own parents—up to lately, when money started to come to me every month from an unknown source, and then doubts began to awaken in my head, for I saw them talking together often as though trying to make up their minds to tell me something."

"Money—how was that?" asked Smalling looking deeply interested.

"Why, along last summer I got a letter from the office of a New York lawyer. It had forty dollars in it, and just a couple of lines saying that I was to accept the gift with the idea of getting an education, and that the same amount would come every month."

"Phew! Looks like something had touched his heart after all! Forty dollars, eh? And has it always come, Ralph?" asked the driver, keeping his eyes fixed upon the horses' heads, as if unwilling to meet the boy's questioning gaze.

"Yes, always. That was how I came to Columbia

to attend the high school, for I was wild to get an education," replied Ralph, soberly.

"Just so, and naturally, too. You come by that desire all right, I guess," muttered Smalling, who seemed to be more or less embarrassed.

A strange thought came into Ralph's mind. What could this confusion on the part of the other signify? He looked eagerly into the face of the little girl sitting beside him. Truth to tell, he was wondering if it could possibly be that Mary might turn out to be his sister!

And, as if something had told Smalling what was flitting through the brain of the boy, he turned his head and looked at him.

"Oh, no, it ain't that, Ralph. You're nothing to me. I've been a bad man in my day, but I give you my word I'd never desert a kid that belonged to me. Drink has been at the bottom of all my evildoing, though it is my own fault. Latterly, I've managed to get a grip on myself, and p'raps it ain't too late to wipe out some of my past. You come to see me this night, lad, and don't fail. I reckon I'll be in a frame of mind to let a few things drop. I ought to, I know. There's something more than accident in our meeting up in this way. It means Fate, that's what!"

"I'll be there, without fail, sir. How could I keep away? And, oh, I hope and pray you won't change

your mind between now and night," faltered the boy, as he put his hand out and touched that of the driver.

Perhaps it was that confiding touch that did it, or possibly Smalling's eyes chanced to fall upon the neatly bandaged hand of Mary just then, and he was overwhelmed by a sense of the debt he owed this lad.

At any rate he impulsively grasped that extended hand and squeezed it warmly.

"I'm going to do more than give a half promise, Ralph. Take my word for it, that when you come to-night I'll clear up pretty much all this affair about who and what you are. And, lad, you needn't worry any more, because it's goin' to be all right," was what he said.

"Oh, thank you ever so much for that promise! It will give me heart to do my level best to-day; and I have need of such a spur, I assure you, Mr. Smalling. There, I had a glimpse of the baseball field just then; and listen, what can they be shouting for?" asked Ralph, as a mighty cheer came rolling toward them.

"Some feller has made a star play in practice, I reckon. I'm some keen on ball myself, and calculated on getting over later to the game. P'raps I'll stop off on the way out from town, though the girl had better be took home to her ma."

"Your wife is living, then?" asked Ralph, even

while he was trying to steady his nerves for the sight that would soon break upon his vision as he entered the big enclosure where Columbia High boys usually met to enjoy baseball, football, and most outdoor sports.

"Oh, yes, and Mary has several brothers and sisters. But she always wants to be the one to fetch my dinner," and from the way he looked down at the girl it was evident that she must be his favorite.

"Here's where I must jump out, sir," said Ralph, suiting the action to the word as they came opposite a big open gate.

"Then I'll look for you to-night?" asked Smalling, his eyes ranging up and down the clean built figure of the lad approvingly, and with a light kindling in his eyes.

"Unless they do me up so well this afternoon that I can't walk, I'll be there," replied the other, smilingly.

"Goodby, Ralph," said the little girl, holding out her well hand. "I won't forget how nice you was. And I'm going to do up these for you, too," pointing to the several handkerchiefs Ralph had used to bind up her hand, and make a sling.

"All right. That'll be fine. Goodby, both of you, until to-night!"

He turned away with a sigh. It seemed almost too good to be true that he was going to hear great

news so very soon. Ralph could hardly believe that he was not dreaming.

And then as he entered through the gate vehicles used, he saw the athletic field and the tremendous throng that packed it.

CHAPTER XV

"PLAY BALL!"

"WHO's the umpire, Lef?" demanded Bill Klemm.

"Name's Willoughby. Used to be a pitcher for Princeton away back, they say."

"What they got him in for? Where's Grigson, the regular umpire?" continued Bill, as though his comrade might be an information bureau.

"Laid up, I hear. Captain Seymour says this feller beats Grig all hollow. Guess they've got it all rigged up to throw the game for Columbia. I wouldn't put it past that Frank Allen and his bunch of toadies," growled Lef, still sore after his experience of the morning.

"But they say Frank ain't going to toss 'em over to-day. Got hurt this morning in some way. One fellow told me he jumped in the river and hauled Minnie Cuthbert out. Nobody seems to know just what happened, but his arm's black and blue where he hit a rock," went on Bill, at the same time eyeing

his friend closely, for he had heard Lef chuckle as though quite tickled.

"So that's what happened to little Frankie, was it? Served him right. He ought to mind his own business. I reckon I'd tamed that hoss down soon if he hadn't cut in when he did," grumbled Lef.

"What's that?" demanded Bill, suspiciously, and showing keen interest.

"Never you mind. Tell about it another time. I know just what Frank Allen did. He's always playing to the gallery, you know. Then who's going to pitch for Columbia?" asked the other, turning the question aside.

"They say Ralph West," replied Bill.

"That country kid. Why, these heavy batters of Bellport will just eat him alive. It's a pity they can't give *me* a chance to show what I can do. I'm better by long odds than I was last year, and I held 'em down to three hits one game. Remember that, don't you, Bill?"

"Course I do. But I'm lookin' for that come-on. Why ain't he showin' up and doin' some practicin'? P'raps he's got the big head, and thinks he don't need to work out any before the game?" suggested Bill, maliciously.

"I kind of guess it's just the other way, Bill," laughed Lef.

"You mean he's got cold feet, and won't show up

at all. Well, that would be a joke now. What d'ye suppose they'd do in such a case, Lef?"

"Either the wounded hero would have to go in and be slaughtered, or else they'd have to temporarily lift my suspension, and let me toe the mark."

"I reckon you're fit, all right, Lef. I've been ketchin' you for a week, and I never thought you had so many cute tricks in you. And speed, why it's there to burn. I hope they do let you have a chance," remarked Bill.

Lef uttered a grunt of disgust.

"It's all off," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What d'ye mean?" asked Bill.

"Look yonder at that wagon stopping on the road by the gate. A feller's jumped out, and he's got a baseball suit on, too. It's that sneak Ralph, as sure's you're born. I'm on to his curves, all right. He just wants to keep the crowd in suspense, you know, and then get the cheers when he shows up. Bah! he makes me tired, that's what."

Lef judged others by himself. Under similar conditions that was just what he would have done, for applause was sweet in his ears.

When Ralph was seen running across the field there was a rippling cheer that advanced into a positive roar. The boy's face flamed, for he was not accustomed to being in the limelight. Still, he paid

no attention to the shouts that greeted his coming, but hastening over to where the boys were still practicing he met Captain Seymour.

"Glad you've turned up, Ralph. The boys were beginning to get a little worried about you, and Frank just said he'd go in if necessary, though his arm is in a bad way, and he might injure it for keeps. We want him for the last game—if there is going to be another," said Roderic, looking closely at the other, as if to make up his mind whether Ralph had brought his nerve with him.

"The delay was entirely unavoidable. I had to carry a little child half a mile. She had crushed her hand. That is her father in the wagon with her, on the way to the doctor's. Hello! Frank! better late than never. Send her in, Paul! How long can I have to warm up, Captain?" said Ralph, as he caught the ball, and began to return it, quietly at first, but with increasing pressure as his muscles responded to the demand made upon them.

"The umpire says that the time is almost up; but on account of your coming late he will postpone calling the game ten minutes. Now, do your prettiest, Ralph. I hope you get that trick ball working handily this afternoon," returned the other, who was plainly more or less nervous.

"I'm feeling in fine shape, Captain. If they knock me hard it will be because I'm out of my class, I

expect," was the confident rejoinder he received.

For fully ten minutes then the young pitcher was the center of observation. Friends and foes alike commented upon his style of delivery. When he sent in an extra swift one a murmur of admiration bubbled forth.

"I guess he's the right sort," called the sanguine Columbia adherent.

"If only he don't lose his head when those hard hitters begin to reach his ball a little. They've sent more than one horse to the stable to be blanketed," declared another, less confident.

Many secretly sighed because Frank Allen was temporarily out of the game.

"Hope he'll be all right by next Saturday, then. We can afford to lose this game, boys. It'll only square things, and make it all the more interesting," cried still another skeptic.

"Give the boy a chance, will you?" demanded a man near by; "you talk like he's thrown this game away already. I tell you he shows up well, and perhaps some of you croakers will get a surprise yet!"

"That's the talk; encourage the boy!" called another spectator.

"He needs it all right," jerred a Bellport rough; "why, what our fellows will do to that kid will be a shame. It's like takin' candy from the baby, that's what!"

And all these floating exclamations came to the ears of Ralph as he stood there near the end of the bleachers and continued to send them in to Paul. He had his teeth set, and was, as far as outward appearances went, as cool as a veteran.

Coach Willoughby, ready for the fray, gave him a signal just then. It signified that there had been sufficient practice, and that he was about to call the start in another minute or two; so Ralph drew on his sweater, not wishing to catch cold, for despite the hot sun there was a cool breeze blowing.

Frank wanted to have a last brief talk with his friend. He knew more about the peculiarities of the Bellport team than Ralph possibly could, and was able to tell him just how some of them could be coaxed to strike at an impossible ball.

"Notice that their captain, Cuthbert Lee, is on his old job to-day at second, in place of Hough. He's a hard hitter, Ralph, but from what I know of him I think your teaser ball will fetch him. Only don't use it too often. And if he ever gets on a base keep your eye on him. He's the fastest runner they have, and can steal bases to beat the band, while the pitcher is winding up."

"Glad you told me, Frank. After the game wait up for me. I've got some grand news to tell you," observed the pitcher, getting up and discarding his

sweater as the loud voice of the old Princeton player, now serving as umpire, was heard saying:

"Play ball!"

Frank took one look at the sparkling eyes of his friend.

"Tell me, is it about that thing?" he asked, eagerly, and Ralph, turning as he started to walk off, nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Bully! You just make up your mind you're going to win, Ralph. I seem to feel it in my bones you are!" Frank said, confidently.

Ralph picked up the new ball which the umpire had tossed into the box, and sent a few sizzling ones to first base while the balance of the team hurried to their places in the field.

The crowd had become strangely silent now. Every eye was glued upon the new pitcher, and of course anxiety made many a Columbia heart nervous, for Ralph was as yet an untried quantity against a regular team. Many had faith in him, or professed to have, though secretly even his boldest adherents found themselves wondering how he would act if those Bellport fellows ever began to bombard his curves as they had been known to do to more than one phenomenon in the past.

The lineup of the Bellport team was just the same as on the preceding Saturday, with the one exception of second base. Here the familiar figure of

Cuthbert Lee was to be seen, and his cheery words gave confidence to his men.

The batting order of the visitors ran as follows:

Snodgrass—Right field.
Lee—Second base.
Banghardt—Center field.
Smith, Jr.—Left field.
Smith, Sr.—First base.
Lacy—Shortstop.
Bardwell—Third base.
Clay—Catcher.
Coddling—Pitcher.

As usual, Snodgrass could be depended upon to work the pitcher for a free ticket to the initial sack, if it was within the range of possibilities. He was a good waiter, and a fine judge of balls.

"Put 'em over for this beanery waiter!"

"Make him hit her out, West!"

"Don't forget you've got eight other fellows back of you, boy!"

"Now, soak it to him, youngster. You know!"

Ralph suddenly shot the ball at the batter like a flash. It passed straight over the plate as though it cut the same in two equal parts.

"Strike—one!" shouted the umpire, even as Snodgrass jumped back, pretending that he had to dodge, though he grinned at the same time.

CHAPTER XVI

MAKING A GOOD START

THROUGH the grandstand and over the field a wave of enthusiasm went.

Ralph paid no attention to the various shouts that greeted his first delivery. He tried to see how he could work his wonderful "spit" ball next, and while Snodgrass struck he never came within inches of a hit.

Derisive cries began to be heard.

"Get Snodgrass his glasses!"

"Put him out to pasture; he's outlived his usefulness!"

Trust the ingenuity of schoolboys to invent scores of cries calculated to unnerve the batter. But Snodgrass only grinned and waited, crouching there as though ready to annihilate the next ball that came along.

Ralph thought it policy to try a couple of outshoots, and as the batter failed to strike they were called balls. It was time now to take his measure again, and Snodgrass knew what was coming.

"Three strikes—batter is out!" followed a wicked sweep which the Bellport right fielder made at the erratic "spit" ball that Ralph handed up.

Lee stood there calmly awaiting his turn. There was something in his attitude to tell Ralph he had more to fear from the captain of the rival team than any other man on it.

Twice Lee struck at elusive balls. Then he managed to connect with one and sent a screamer at "Bones" Shadduck on third, which that worthy succeeded in knocking down, though recovering the ball just too late to catch the swift runner.

"Now we're off!" howled the coach, as he came running up to take his place near the man on first.

Hardly had he spoken than the ball came plunk into the hands of Lanky, who had been expecting such a thing. Lee had danced off, as was his usual custom. He made a desperate plunge for the bag, but Lanky got him.

"You're out!" shouted the umpire, waving his hand suggestively.

Such a whoop as went up! It seemed as though the crowd had gone wild. Bellport supporters looked each other in the face.

"What's this we've struck?" said one, blankly.

"He caught Cuthbert napping, sure! I never knew that to happen before!"

"He's a wonder at throwing that ball to first.

Guess we ain't going to steal many sacks on that kid to-day, you hear me?" exclaimed another.

"Oh! rats! you give me a pain! That was only an accident. He couldn't do it again in a year of Sundays!" ejaculated one of the Bellport players who was lounging near the bleachers.

"Perhaps not," laughed a Columbia graduate, "but all the same he's got you fellows guessing, and you'll cut your leads short at bases while he's in the box."

Banghardt, after knocking three fouls, also struck out. This record against such known heavy hitters delighted the crowd. A rattling cheer and much hand-clapping greeted the incoming of Ralph. Of course he had to doff his cap, and smile; but at the same time he did not appear to be excited.

The umpire was watching him curiously, for Ralph had interested the veteran Princeton player very much.

"I think he's going to do himself proud to-day. These fellows may win, but not through that boy going up in the air. He knows how to master himself," was what he said to Frank Allen, as he took a drink from the water bucket.

"I knew he had it in him; and I'm rather pleased that an accident kept me out of the box to-day. It may be the making of Ralph," replied the other;

and hearing such warm, generous words, the umpire nodded his head in appreciation.

He had doubtless known so much shallow envy among ball players that such an exhibition of pure devotion to the interests of the school pleased him greatly.

The lineup of Columbia had been altered somewhat, on account of Ralph taking the place of Frank as pitcher. This threw him last on the batting order. Ben Allison, the regular right fielder, was fortunately able to occupy that place, and consequently he faced Coddling first.

By the way Coddling threw a few to his first baseman it was evident that he had felt the defeat of the previous Saturday keenly, and was there with blood in his eye, determined to retrieve that disaster.

"Look at that, will you? Ain't he got speed to burn to-day? I'm sorry for Columbia, boys," called a Bellport student, with the colors of his school on his hat.

"Get out your wipers, boys. It's sure going to be a funeral!" mocked a boy who boasted of the famous orange and purple.

"Let up, you fellows. He's going to pitch one now!" shouted a man near by; and again the interest was centered upon the pitcher's box.

Coddling wound up and shot one over. Allison

promptly struck, but his bat only whistled through the air, for the excellent reason that the ball was not within six inches of where he supposed it to be.

"Say, Mister Coddling is some at that sort of thing, you see!" howled a delighted Bellport supporter, jumping up and addressing the bleacher crowd.

"Sit down!"

"Hire a hall and take a day off!"

"Watch him send another disappearing ball down the line, boys!"

Coddling did. He had Allison guessing right from the start. Perhaps that was because the right fielder had not faced him as yet this seaosn, and his enforced layoff had rather weakened his batting eye, for usually Ben was a reliable hitter.

When he struck for the third time, and the umpire waved him away, Allison only grinned and trotted back to the bench, shaking his head humorously.

"Bones" Shadduck took his place, and was immediately greeted with a series of entreaties to accomplish something.

"Hit her out, even if you are caught!" his admirers yelled.

Shadduck made ready to do his best. One strike was called, and as yet he apparently had not gauged

the delivery of the wizard pitcher, who faced him with that tantalizing smile on his face.

Then he bunted, and was off for first like a shot. Coddling made a wild dash for the ball, which had started to roll along the line toward the sack. It looked as though it would go foul, and perhaps that was what kept the agile pitcher from trying to snatch it up. When he did, it was too late, for Bones had galloped over first, and was safe.

Jack Comfort's business was to sacrifice him down along the line. He, too, bunted, and while easily out himself, Bones had seen his signal, and got a lovely start, so that he found himself squatting on second.

"That's the way to do it! Play the game! Now, Lanky, you're IT!"

Lanky managed to knock a grounder that landed him on first, and Shadduck on third.

"Coddling, take a brace and put 'em over!"

Then stepped up Buster Billings. His appearance always created a ripple of amusement, on account of his ponderous calves. Buster only winked knowingly at the yelling crowd and raised his bat, waving it to and fro, cautiously.

"Why, the feller thinks he can bunt now. Say, don't you know there's two out?"

"Let Buster alone. He knows his business, you'll see! That's only his gentle way."

"And he can bat some, fellers, believe me!"

Buster heard this last remark.

"Thank you awfully for that kindness!" he remarked.

"One strike!" said the umpire.

"Hey, was that a baseball or a cannon ball that whizzed past?" demanded Buster, pretending to be greatly astonished when he heard the thud of the horsehide sphere in Clay's old mitt.

And then he smote the very next ball that came spinning along, smote it with so much energy that it sailed away toward center field, with Tony Banghardt running like a wild broncho in the endeavor to get under.

Of course Shadduck was away at once, since there were already two out. Looking over his shoulder as he bolted like a frightened deer, he saw Banghard make a gallant effort to spear the descending ball with extended hand; but he lacked a few inches of being in a position to accomplish this.

Bones came home and the batter managed to land on second, whereas another player might have reached third, while Lanky perched on third, unable to get home. Still, the crowd forgave Buster for his slow running and assured him he was all right.

It would have made no difference at any rate, for Tom Budd struck out, after he had knocked up

four fouls and quite tired Buster with false starts.

One inning had been played. The score stood one to nothing, in favor of Columbia.

"Good boy! Do it some more, West!"

Ralph went into the box for that second inning, resolved to continue his cool methods, and not allow anything to rattle him.

His first man he managed to get with considerable effort. Smith, Jr., was possessed of a good batting eye, and could not be easily fooled with fade-aways and such. Still, he fell before that wonderful spit ball that had such an erratic course, and the umpire finally announced that the sizzling straight one that burned over the plate was the signal for him to go into retirement.

After that Smith, Sr., stood up to give an account of himself. He never appeared without his usual grin, and even the taunts of the crowd did not change his expression an iota.

"Smash!"

That was Smith, Sr.'s bat connecting with the ball.

"Run!" shrieked scores of voices, as the bleachers arose to a man to see just where the ball had gone.

Allison was after it, and making rapid progress over the stubby grass in left.

"He can get it—good old Ben is on the spot!" yelled one well wisher.

"Will he—maybe, maybe not!" sang out Jack Eastwick, mockingly.

Allison did his best to get there; but there was too much steam to that hit, and it escaped him, while Smith cantered home amid a salvo of frenzied shouts.

CHAPTER XVII

NEARING THE END

THE game moved along slowly.

Seven full innings had been played, and the score was still low. It had swung around until it stood in favor of Bellport, four to three.

"It's anybody's game yet!" shouted several.

"Get into harness, boys! Put on another wrinkle and win out! You can do it, Columbia!"

"Where's Herman Hooker? Get that voice of yours working just now. Give the boys encouragement. That's all they want to pull out! Start her up, Herman!"

"Yes, tune up, Herman!"

And as Bellport came to bat for the beginning of the ninth, with no change in the score as yet, Herman marshalled his cohorts in the bleachers, and with that strident voice of his to lead, began to cheer in concert, bleat out the famous school cry, and sing "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," the immense crowd joining in until the volume of sound might have been heard a mile away.

"Careful, Ralph; this is a crisis!" Frank Allen had said as his friend picked up his glove and started toward the box.

Ralph looked perfectly cool. Indeed, many who saw him, and knew that this was his first game in big company, prophesied that he would turn out to be the greatest pitcher Columbia had ever known, given a little more experience.

He had just sent one over, and smiled to hear the umpire instantly call a strike, when there arose a medley of voices from the point just beyond the termination of the bleachers.

Ralph had accepted the ball from his catcher, and held it gripped in his hand as he took a step back into his box. Naturally his attention was directed toward the spot, where he saw a tremendous commotion had started, with men and boys swarming back.

"A fight! A fight!" was the first cry that passed around to the grandstand, and hundreds immediately stood up to see, their interest in the game for the moment forgotten.

But they immediately discovered that it must be something else that had caused this stampede, for the runners appeared to be frightened. What could it be? Frank shouted to Police Chief Hogg, and the latter started on the run for the scene of disturbance.

Every man, woman and child was now standing up and craning necks to find out the truth. They saw people running, women showing symptoms of terror, and even men trying to put space between themselves and some mysterious danger.

Then a shout went up, for upon the field had suddenly appeared a bull, showing symptoms of anger, and evidently in a mood to launch himself at the crowd, many of the ladies wearing gaily-colored garments that appeared to arouse the fighting spirit of the animal.

Some of the boys of Columbia recognized the bull as one belonging to a farmer who owned the property adjoining the athletic field on the right, and back of the grandstand. A high fence shut off this pasture, but perhaps some of the boards may have fallen down. At any rate, there was the bull trotting straight toward the diamond, with hundreds of frantic people going into a panic.

"He wants to toss a few over! Give the bull a chance!" shouted a funny fellow from the safety of the grandstand; but had he been out there on the field doubtless he would ere this have been taking to his heels, like the majority of the alarmed spectators.

Frank immediately suspected that some thoughtless scamp who loved a prank without counting the cost may have coaxed the bull to the opening made

in the fence, by waving a red handkerchief, and then dodging when he had accomplished his purpose.

"Get bats, fellows; we've got to chase him back to cover!" he shouted, suiting his action to his words.

Other players also snatched up some of the war clubs, and thus armed they bore down on the object of their solicitude. Meanwhile the bull had trotted straight for Ralph in the box. It looked as though the animal meant to follow up the advice of the joker in the grand stand, and ascertain whether he could knock the pitcher out of the box.

Ralph stood his ground. Indeed, he hardly knew what to do, such was the tremendous clamor all around him.

"Soak him one, you!" howled a fellow who stood on the top seat of the bleachers, and waved his arms.

It was so easy to tell another what to do just then, especially when in an apparently safe place himself.

"Yes, hit him in the eye, Ralph! Here's your chance to win your own game!"

"Shoo the bully old boy away! He's interfering with our game!"

"It's a set-up job of Columbia when they're getting licked, that's what!"

Ralph heard everything that was said. At the

same time he drew back his arm, with the intention of delivering as swift a ball as he possibly could. Of course, it could hardly be expected that such a puny thing as a baseball would be sufficient to drive the bull away; but it was all Ralph could do—and he did it to the best of his ability.

"Straight to the bull's-eye, Ralph!" came a last shout, just as he let go; and somehow it gave the boy more or less satisfaction to know that he had indeed done as directed.

The hard ball struck the animal with tremendous force on the side of the head, and, bounding off, fell upon the diamond. Perhaps the blow astonished the unwelcome visitor at the game. He seemed to stop a few seconds as if trying to figure just where the new assault had come from.

"At him, boys!" shouted Frank, enabled to come up because of this little delay.

A dozen lads, Bellport players as well as those of Columbia, had armed themselves with bats. They were close at Frank's heels when he started in to belabor the bull on the flanks vigorously.

One assailant the big fellow might have attacked, but the multitude cowed him. Possibly he was not a very vicious animal after all. Be that as it might, the boys surrounded him like a wall, and forced him to trot off toward the broken fence. He was last seen kicking up his heels as he went through

the gap, and his bellow a few seconds afterward announced that while he may have thought it prudent to retreat before superior numbers, his spirit was not crushed.

Frank, while the others returned toward the diamond, winded a little from their efforts, took a look at the fence as he was temporarily fixing up the several boards that lay upon the ground.

"These were all right before the game started. Either some fellows knocked them off to get in without paying, or else it was a set-up job to give trouble."

This last idea made him instantly think of the fellow most likely to engineer a miserable game like this—Lef Seller. He remembered seeing the bully over on the field at the end of the bleachers some little time before, and several of his cronies with him. Could he have possibly taken advantage of every eye being riveted on the close game to play this dangerous prank? Some one might have been seriously injured by the coming of the bull.

"What's this."

Just before putting up the last plank Frank had thrust his head through the opening to see what had become of the baffled bull. His eye had fallen on something red lying in the rank grass close to the fence.

"It's a red bandana handkerchief, and a new one,

too, that has never even been in the wash. And that was what they used to lure Mr. Bull in here. Well, perhaps a fellow may think that a joke, but if half a dozen women or children had been gored he might have gone to prison for it."

He looked at the gaudy thing again.

"Perhaps I may be able to find out who owns this. Looks like it must have been bought this very day. Anyhow, 'finders keepers,' and I'm in one stunning red bandana blower," and, laughing as he stowed it away, he returned to see the continuation of the close game.

Smith, Sr., was on deck, with his bat making little circles as he waited for his chance to whack the ball. He had a peculiar "crouch" that amused the crowd; but as the elongated first baseman was a natural hitter, much could be forgiven him. In baseball a batting eye is like the mantle of charity, since it covers a multitude of sins.

Smith, Sr., did hit it, too, though he should have been an easy out, only that the ball took an unexpected bounce just as Seymour had set himself to gobble it, and shot over his head.

"Oh!" came in a groan from all over the field, though every one who knew the game understood it was none of the second baseman's fault, since he never even touched the ball.

Smith reached first, and made a grand bluff of

galloping down toward second to draw the throw, but without success.

Lacy was a shrewd one, and sacrificed himself for the good of the cause, advancing his comrade nicely to second. Bardwell tried the same thing, but tapped the ball too hard. Consequently it went quickly to Ralph, who snatched it up, hurled it like a cannon ball to third, catching the runner; and then it was shot across the diamond in time to just double up the stout Bardwell as he jumped for the first sack.

"Now, what do you think of that?" shrieked the local boys in chorus, led by the "best yeller Columbia ever had."

"Never could do it again in a hundred years. Bardwell stumbled, as he generally does. Luck was against us!" answered one of the Bellport shouters, promptly.

Bellport had finished their side of the game. Columbia still had an inning to play, with one run to tie, and two to win!

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNFORTUNATE HIT

"Who's up?" demanded Paul Bird, as he tossed his mask and chest protector aside, wiped his steaming face, and picked up a bat.

"You are, and if ever you made a base hit get one in now!" said Captain Seymour.

"Yes, everything depends on this inning. We can do it if we try, fellows!" exclaimed Ben Allison, also selecting his favorite piece of ash.

Once again the crowd settled down, though the anxiety felt was plainly depicted on the faces all around.

The noise had broken out again worse than ever. Even the voice of the brazen-throated Princeton man could not be heard, and he depended on signals to announce whether it might be a ball or a strike. Not one of those boys but whose nerves thrilled with the intense strain. And it can easily be understood how Coddling must have suffered as he

toed the slab once more to try and mow the Columbia boys down, so as to prevent a run.

"You know how to do it, Coddling. Give them some of your famous teasers, and see 'em break their backs trying to connect!"

"Yes, Coddling, one, two, three for yours, now. And start right in with this guy of a catcher!"

"What have you got on him, hey? Did he let a ball pass him like your feller? He ain't so hefty, but he's the stuff they make champions out of!" declared a Columbia backer, a brawny blacksmith, whose appearance alone was enough to inspire respect, so that the Bellport man dared make no answer.

Paul waited. He did not want to appear too anxious. He knew that the man who was hurling that ball over was just as nervous as they make them, and he hoped to profit by this. Still, he could not hold off when he felt sure he saw a ball coming within his reach.

Too late after he struck he learned that it was one of Coddling's shrewd out-shoots, and that it had jumped beyond his reach.

"Get a pole, sonny!" advised some one from the crowd.

"He felt for it that time; now he's going to take some!" shouted another.

"Strike two!" came the voice of the umpire,

though Paul had not tried to connect; and that was one of Coddling's equally clever inshoots which had seemed as if about to miss the plate by a foot, yet took a sudden turn and shot in.

If one were only a mind reader, Paul thought, and could guess every time what the pitcher intended to do, how easy it would all be.

Suddenly changing his hold upon his bat, Paul thrust it out with the intention of bunting. He managed to connect, and was off like a flash, though doubtful as to his chances for reaching first, for he felt that he had not made as neat a drop of the ball as he had hoped.

Still, the ball player to be successful must try to the utmost, no matter how discouraging the prospect, always hoping that some little luck may turn things his way—a dropped or fumbled ball has given many a base that was not earned.

"Run, Paul! Harder and you'll get there!" shrieked Herman through his megaphone, and the sound seemed to spur the catcher to even greater exertions.

Runner and ball seemed to arrive at the same second. Some shouted that he was out, and partisans of Columbia cried that he was safe. The umpire steadied his hand. That meant the runner had the benefit of the doubt, and should remain where he was on first.

Then Bedlam semed to break out! Even though every fan from Bellport knew deep down in his heart that the decision was just, still he felt it incumbent on him to howl at the umpire, and the ancient word, "robber!" was heard right and left.

The old Princeton man only smiled, and turned his attention to the game. Doubtless he chuckled at hearing the old familiar outbursts to which he had listened many a time himself, and perhaps joined in shouting at the referee.

By degrees the excitement began to ooze out, as attention became riveted on the next man at bat. This was Ralph.

They had failed to rattle him while in the box, but that did not prevent the Bellport legions from indulging in a most astonishing din. Ralph never noticed what was going on. His eye was on Coddling. He wanted to guess what sort of a ball the clever Bellport twirler meant to dish up to him.

"Watch that feller! He's going to win the game if you let him hit it!"

"Strike him out, Coddling. He's dead easy!"

"Hey, Ralph, old boy, you know what I told you? Nothing less than a three-bagger will do! Hear me?" called one fellow, who did not even know the batter to speak to; but on the ball field astonishing familiarity becomes the rule.

Ralph had his teeth set hard. If it depended on

him to win the game he meant that they should not be disappointed. He watched Coddling eagerly, yet with every muscle set for instantaneous work.

Whack!

"He done it! I told you so!"

Ralph was jumping for first, while Paul had run down to second. The third baseman had knocked the ball down, but had to chase it, so that Coddling rushed over to cover third as in duty bound, in case Paul attempted to come along.

But he went back to second, quite contented. Columbia stock rose just about then; and Herman again led his crowd whooping in concert:

"Ho! ho! ho! hi! hi! hi! *veni! vidi! vici!* Columbia! Sis boom, ah!"

"Once more, fellows! You can do it! They're going to pieces! See 'em creeping in, expecting to make a double play. Over the second base, and win the game, Ben, and the pennant!"

Allison meant to do that same thing. He took a firm grip on his bat, and settled in his box to strike. Since that first time he had faced Coddling three times, and on every occasion had connected with the ball, though twice he went out, once at first and again when trying to stretch a fine hit into a triple, much to the disgust of his backers.

The noise died away as if by magic. Every one was holding his or her breath, in the expectation of

giving vent to a whoop when Allison had either done what he set out to do or passed out.

Seymour stepped out and whispered to the batter.

"He's telling him to bunt!" cried a few, expecting that this would be the program; and not realizing that with the infield playing short it was next to suicidal to attempt anything along this order, and meant double play.

Both basemen were playing well off, because they had nothing to fear. Excitement was keyed up to top notch.

"Look out for Banghardt!" shrieked a coach; and Paul found that the center fielder had crept in, so that he came near being cut off from his bag.

Again Coddling wound up to pitch. Allison let the sphere pass.

"One ball!"

The next time it came the batter smote it full "on the nose" and the sound of the collision electrified that entire assemblage like a shock from a gigantic battery. But alack and alas! as sometimes happens, while he drove the ball directly in the line he had marked out, it chanced to be just a few feet too low!

To the horror of the Columbia adherents it landed full in the eager hands of the second baseman, who held it fiercely for just a second, when he sent it

with all his might to Bardwell on third, but not before touching his own base.

Was it a triple? There was a wild upheaval on the part of the entire mass of spectators. Paul had thrown himself headlong for the bag, but that swiftly-sent sphere was there just before him!

The umpire made a sweeping motion of his hand. Paul was out, and consequently Bellport had won the game by making a wonderfully clever triple in the last inning!

Bedlam broke loose right then and there, and the crowd surged over the field, whooping and howling their various class yells. Herman led in a volcanic cheer for the clever players who had managed that remarkable play; and followed this with shouts for both teams. Then songs were sung, and the boys fraternized.

It had been a splendid exhibition of work on both sides. No one need be ashamed of having lost such a game as that, as Frank hastened to assure Ralph, who was naturally feeling a little sore over such a sudden downfall to his high hopes.

"The fortune of the game, old chap! Got to get used to it. Why, just before Ben knocked into that triple it looked as if we had 'em dead easy. Oh! why couldn't he have pulled off one of his favorite little flies just over second! But what's the use crying over spilt milk? You did great work in the box!

Every one is saying we picked up a prize when we came across you, Ralph."

By this time Ralph could himself smile a little.

"After all, I came out twice as well as I expected. If you don't think my work was the cause of the defeat I ought to be satisfied. I thought that bull coming on the field broke me up a little. But, then, they didn't make another run," he said.

Frank threw an arm around his friend and walked away with him. He wanted to get out of the crowd so that they could talk. He had heard what Ralph told Captain Seymour, and was naturally curious to learn about the little adventure that had delayed the arrival of the new pitcher.

Besides, there had been those thrilling words spoken by Ralph in connection with something that bore upon his own tangled fortunes. What could have happened?

"Now, you know I'm just burning up with curiosity to hear what's been going on, Ralph. What about this litle child you carried home after she hurt her hand; and how does that happen to have any connection with your own matters?" he remarked, when they found themselves removed to some degree from the crowd that was swarming along the road back to Columbia, some to take the trolley for Bellport, others river conveyances for Clifford and beyond.

Ralph turned a glowing face upon his friend.

"Oh! Frank, I can hardly believe it even now, it seems so very strange! Just to think, because I wouldn't believe some fellows were trying to get me in the bushes, where they could keep me from showing up, I'm going to hear the truth about the past, and who I really am!"

"Hurrah! that's great news you're telling me, and I'm sure as glad as if I'd found another dad myself!" exclaimed Frank.

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT UNCLE JIM KNEW

"Of course you are, Frank! Don't I know what an interest you've taken in this affair?"

Ralph looked into the face of his friend as he spoke, and there was sincere affection in his expression.

"But tell me what happened, for I'm just wild to know, Ralph."

The other had looked around several times while they walked away from the field that had so lately been the arena for that fiercely-fought battle of the bats.

"There's some one following us, Frank," he said, uneasily.

"Oh! come, you're nervous after all this strain, and imagining things. I guess it's only some fellow who happens to want to go the same way we do."

But when Frank had turned his head, to the surprise of his comrade he gave vent to an exclamation,

"Well, I declare if I don't believe it is him!" he ejaculated, and his face took on an expression of pleasure.

"Who is it?" asked Ralph, eagerly.

"Why, who but my uncle Jim!" was the reply.

Ralph went a little white. Really things were happening very rapidly, once they had taken a start. He observed with deepest interest the big man who was breathing hard as he managed to overtake them; and Ralph took especial note of the fact that he seemed to have a very genial face.

"Hello! there, Frank; I thought it was you; but you boys walk so fast I had more or less trouble in overtaking you, and as to getting through that crowd to speak to you on the field, it was utterly impossible! How are you, my boy?" and the big man from New York held out his hand to his nephew.

"Glad to see you, Uncle Jim. And it's plain that you are just as fond of baseball as ever. Sorry you saw Columbia go down in defeat, though," said Frank.

"Oh! that comes to every club sooner or later; and in this case it was one of those accidents that can never be avoided. I saw the last few innings, and that triple play took my breath away. I give you my word that contest was the equal of any I've seen this year among the big leagues. And isn't

this the game little pitcher who held them down so well?" with a curious glance at Frank's companion.

"Sure it is, and he would have won his game only for that streak of tough luck. Uncle Jim, let me introduce to you my friend, Ralph West!"

The lawyer started and looked closer than ever at the second boy.

"Glad to meet you, Ralph. And, to tell the honest truth, it was to see you that I've journeyed up here just at a very busy time in my practice."

He still kept his eyes fastened on the face of the boy, which of course he could see had gone white.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir; and it's mighty nice for you to say such kind things about my work. I'm green at it yet, but hope to do better after more practice," Ralph managed to say.

"No doubt of that, not a bit. You've got all the earmarks of a 'comer' in that line. But, Ralph, I wish I were bringing you better news than I am able to. I've been convinced by my brother that it is only right to tell what little I know in connection with that money, regardless of my promise. I'm only sorry I happen to know so little, that's all. But it may start you along the right road."

"Thank you, sir. Every little must help. I've been fortunate enough to-day to meet a man who seems to know something about the mystery of my life; and he's promised to tell me all this very night.

So that good luck seems to be swinging around my way just now."

"Yes, Ralph seems to have been able to have done this man a great favor. As near as I can make out he found a little child in the woods with her hand crushed. She was crying bitterly. Ralph was on his way by a roundabout route to the ball grounds when this happened; yet he carried that child a long distance to her father. And it seems that the man recognized Ralph, or on hearing his name, I don't know which, only that he promised to tell him something to-night," remarked Frank, eagerly.

"Fine! couldn't be better all around," said the lawyer, enthusiastically. "I see that to have been of any assistance I should have turned up earlier. But I had some very important cases on the docket; and was not quite sure that I ought to break my word until I received an urgent letter from Frank's father here. I can tell you just what I know in a very few words, if you want me to, Ralph?"

"I am wild to hear, sir, and was just wondering how I could hold out several hours until night came along. Please start right now, Judge Allen!" exclaimed the boy.

"Well, I am a man of very few words, which you will admit is singular in a member of the legal profession. The facts in the case are these: Last sum-

mer there walked into my office a gentleman whose card I have here with me."

Ralph glanced at the bit of pasteboard, and was strangely thrilled to read the name "Arnold Gregory Musgrove."

"Musgrove!" he repeated to himself several times, as though it seemed to find a singular response somewhere in the cells of his brain. Oh! could it be possible that his name was the same as that of the mysterious gentleman?

The keen-eyed lawyer knew instinctively what must be passing in his young mind, for he shook his head seriously.

"It may be just possible, Ralph, but until you hear what this other party has to say I wouldn't build up too many hopes in that direction. What I have to tell you will not put you in possession of the positive facts. But to resume. This gentleman first of all asked me if, in the line of my business, I would undertake a little charitable work for him, and I, of course, said I was there for any position of trust connected with estates or otherwise; for you know, Frank, that much of my income consists of remuneration received from the care of property, as I am what is called an estate lawyer.

"Well, he told me that he had had a dear friend who had died in abject poverty years back, and left a boy who had been taken to the poorhouse away up

in the country. The truth had only come to him of late, and he wanted to do something for that lad, but secretly, so that his name might never be known in connection with the matter."

Ralph gripped the hand of Frank convulsively at hearing this; but he did not utter one word, only kept his glowing eyes fixed upon the lawyer's sympathetic face.

"Upon investigating he had found that the lad had been taken into their home by a couple named West, living in the village of Scardale. He also seemed to know that the boy was keenly desirous of securing an education, from which he was now debarred by the lack of means of his supposed parents.

"And so after binding me to secrecy he explained his plan of action. I was to act as his intermediary, sending a stated sum the first of every month, and never letting a single hint fall as to whence it came. Sitting there at my typewriter, Mr. Musgrove himself wrote those few lines accompanying the first remittance. And I have never seen him since that day, though I learned he was in Europe traveling with a widowed sister."

Ralph sighed heavily.

"I wonder if it can be true? And if it is, why shouldn't he want to tell me just who my father and father were? If I could only meet him face to face

I would ask him that, and expect an answer," he said, slowly.

"Well," said the lawyer, with a little laugh, "from what I saw of this Musgrove I'm afraid you wouldn't meet with great success. I didn't wholly like his looks. There was something shifty in his eye, although he was rather a handsome gentleman, and evidently accustomed to the best in the land."

Frank spoke up just then.

"I can guess that you've been considering the whole strange affair since you got my letter, Uncle, and have arrived at some sort of conclusion yourself. Won't you tell us what you suspect, please?" he said, urgently.

"That's a hard thing to put up to a lawyer, accustomed to dealing only in stern facts, and eliminating fiction from his figuring. But since meeting Ralph here I've made up my mind to turn to his side of the case. In fact, before coming up I wrote to the address Mr. Musgrove left me, informing him that I must throw up his affairs, since business was too pressing. That leaves me free-handed; and I can assist your young friend, Frank, without stultifying myself."

"I knew you would, Uncle Jim. And now tell us what you think!" cried Frank.

"Just this: I have a suspicion that Mr. Arnold Musgrove may have had a hand in some business in

the past that would not bear inspection. In other words, that he was responsible for that boy being left at the door of the poorhouse! That is a bold assertion to make, without positive proof, and I would hardly like to stand sponsor for it in court; but I am only telling you this in secret."

"Yes, go on, please," said Frank, throwing an arm again around Ralph's shoulders, for he knew the other was trembling violently with emotion.

"And as the years rolled on he must have kept informed about what happened, for he knew all about how Ralph had been adopted by the Wests; yes, even to his ambition for an education. I imagine the man's conscience has begun to reproach him as he grows older; and that it has finally forced him to do something to compensate in a small way for his action!"

After the lawyer had ceased talking there was silence for a full minute, broken finally by Frank, saying:

"Well, perhaps he may know it all to-night. I've got my suspicions already, but I'm not going to say anything yet. But I tell you I won't sleep a wink to-night until I've heard what Ralph has to report. By the way, did you ever find out what the name of Mr. Musgrove's widowed sister was?"

"Yes, I had that much curiosity. It is Mrs. John Langworthy, and her husband was a very smart

and wealthy lawyer years ago," replied Uncle Jim, with a knowing smile.

"H'm; Langworthy, eh?" and Frank looked meaningly at Ralph, as he echoed the name.

CHAPTER XX

TWICE A PRISONER

It was a peculiar coincidence that the freshman spread was to come off this same night that meant so much to Ralph.

The sophomores had been wild to glean the particulars, so that they might in some fashion manage to break up the feast, either by kidnaping some of the first-year students, get possession of the president of the class, or else purloin the good things that had been laid in for the spread.

Ralph had intended going, for it promised to be great fun. This new turn to his own private affairs, however, knocked the notion out of his head. Indeed, he forgot about it entirely.

The minutes dragged terribly, and yet he knew that he ought to wait a decent time to allow Sam Smalling and his little family a chance to eat their supper.

About a quarter to eight he could hold back no longer. It was getting dark, but he had asked ques-

tions of Frank, and knew just where to find the cottage in which the Smallings lived.

To reach it he must walk almost a mile around the town; but that, he expected, would be a matter of only ten or fifteen minutes at most.

So wrapped up was Ralph in his own affairs that he never once thought of looking around him when he stepped out of the gate and started off. Had he done so he would have discovered several dusky figures dogging his footsteps in a very suspicious manner.

They kept just so far in his rear until the town had been left behind, and the country was at hand. Of course these were sophs bent upon keeping the new favorite of the freshies from attending that dinner, which was doubtless to be spread in some isolated barn far beyond the confines of Columbia, in order to lessen the chances of the second class interrupting the feast.

Suddenly Ralph's sober thoughts were interrupted. He found himself pounced upon and borne to the ground. In vain he struggled, for three proved too much for even the athletic hero of that afternoon game.

At first he was amazed at what was happening, and thoughts of some rascals boldly playing the part of highway robbers flitted through his mind.

Then a face was thrust close to his, and a voice said:

"Your goose is cooked, freshie. No fine spread in yours this night. Instead, you will occupy a dungeon until the midnight hour has struck. And if our plans carry right we'll have gobbled your class grub long before then."

Of course the truth flashed through Ralph's mind now. He knew that he had fallen into the clutches of the watchful sophomores, eager to capture all the leading lights of the lower class, and spoil the long anticipated treat.

It was exasperating to say the least. Of course none of them would believe him if he declared that he had no idea of attending the dinner, and was bent on private business of the utmost importance.

Just as he expected, when he started to speak of this they only jeered him.

"Tell that to the marines, freshie. Don't we know that they expect to elect you the president of the class to-night, in place of Rud Kipling, who went home last week sick? Oh! no, you don't get loose until the clock strikes twelve, so save your breath. Tie his hands, boys, and bring him along. I know a cot beneath the hill, and there we'll chuck him in to ruminate, while we hike after that grub."

They assisted him to his feet after his hands had been rudely lashed. Through a woods they walked,

whispering at times. Ralph was really angry at this unexpected bit of hard luck. If the boys only knew what it meant to him to have his liberty they could not have the heart to hold him a prisoner in this way.

Coming to an old cabin, once the home of charcoal burners, but long deserted, they thrust him inside and, closing the door, fastened it in some manner.

When the mocking voices of the sophomores had died away in the distance, and Ralph found himself alone, he set about trying to effect his escape. Had it been the dinner alone that was the inducement he might have taken it philosophically, and simply laughed at his predicament; but while he remained there, precious minutes were passing, and the story of his mysterious past waiting to be told.

He struggled with the cord they had wrapped about his wrists. The sophs were far from being experts in tying up a prisoner, so that there was a chance for Ralph to work his hands free. Force would not accomplish it, but by manipulating his right hand he was presently able to draw it out of the bonds.

There remained only the door between him and liberty. He examined this part of the structure, to find, as he suspected, that it was just as flimsy as the rest of the old cabin. Consequently, when he

threw his weight against it, after several attempts, the door gave way with a crash.

Striking a light, Ralph found that all this had only taken just fifteen minutes. It was now eight o'clock plus seven minutes; and he was free to go his way.

Another thought came into his mind. Loyalty to his class struggled with this wild desire on his part to hasten to the home of Sam Smalling, so as to hear all he had to say.

Was he not in duty bound to warn his fellows in some manner? From what words the sophomores who had captured him had let drop, it was evident that they knew where the spread was to take place, and that a raid was being organized, looking to the stealing of the dainties provided for the freshman dinner.

Ralph thought it over, even as he was hurrying along. After all, it seemed up to him to do something to save his class the mortification of being made the laughing stock of the vindictive second-year boys, who were evidently abroad in force, bent on breaking up the spread.

Now that he came to consider the matter, the place of secret meeting was in the same direction. No wonder his captors were positive that he had been heading for the rendezvous when overtaken with disaster.

"I might go out of my way enough to meet some

of the boys, and put them on their guard," he said, finally.

That was Ralph's nature all over, ever ready to sacrifice his own interests in order to benefit those with whom he was associated. It was the spirit instilled in the souls of the Delta Pi members—loyalty first of all to the school, and next to one's class.

So Ralph made his way along cautiously. He was in mortal fear lest he be pounced upon at any moment by others of the prowling sophs, and held once more a prisoner.

In this fashion he drew near the farm where stood the barn hired for the occasion by the freshmen. No doubt it was completely surrounded by a cordon of eager sophs, anxious to accomplish their work of retaliation, for the freshmen had effectually broken up their entertainment earlier in the season.

Hearing voices coming along the road, indicating a large company of boys and girls, Ralph knew that the main body of his fellow class members must be approaching, having gathered in town somewhere, since the girls refused to attend unless suitably protected.

Of course the sophomores would not dare attack this group. Indeed, their plans covered a different field entirely, since they contemplated making way

with the provisions that were being carried to the spread.

Ralph waited until they were exactly opposite.

"Watchman, what of the night?" he asked, suddenly appearing among them.

Several of the freshmen, thinking that an attack was about to be sprung on them, had started to grapple with the single figure. The passwords spoken by Ralph, however, reassured them.

"Don't mention my name, anybody," said Ralph, in an impressive whisper; "for some of the sophomores are hiding near by. They think I'm a prisoner in the old hut of the charcoal burners in the woods. I escaped and came here to tell you that they know all about the place of meeting."

"Then somebody leaked, that's all," grumbled one of the boys, angrily.

"I suppose so. But they mean to get a chance to steal your grub. Look out for them, fellows. Keep a good watch out," said Ralph, impressively.

"Hey! hold on, where are you going to?" demanded one of the group as Ralph started to slip away.

"Sorry, but I can't be with you to-night, fellows. Some mighty important business of a private character chains me down," explained the other.

"No, you don't now. You're needed at the spread more than any other fellow; and we don't mean to

let you off this time. Private matters must wait when the class of Umty Fourteen has the call. Duty before pleasure, you know. Besides, you're IT to-night, and we just won't get on without you. Come on!"

Ralph thus found himself in another fix, and could well exclaim to be delivered from his friends. First the enemy had captured him and tried to keep him a prisoner until midnight. And now the fellow members of his class, having determined to elect him president for the balance of the season, seemed equally bent on preventing him from keeping his appointment with Smalling.

He said nothing further, but walked along with the crowd. All the while he was keeping his eyes open in the hope of seeing a chance to drop out, and giving his classmates the slip. He could not bear the thought of postponing the interview with Sam Smalling that might mean everything in the world to him.

They had reached the barn before he found his opportunity. A number of freshmen had come on at dusk to guard the place, so that their enemies might not take possession unawares, and shut them out.

While the two divisions were fraternizing Ralph saw his chance, and dodged aside.

"Here, where's Ralph West gone to? We mustn't let him slip away," said a voice.

"He was here a minute ago, but now he's gone!" cried Helen Allen, in a plaintive voice; and Ralph felt doubly sorry that he was compelled to forego a pleasant evening in the company of Frank's sister.

Scurrying through the end of the barn, he reached the open air,

CHAPTER XXI

RALPH HEARS SOMETHING

RALPH had become cautious by this time.

"Two narrow squeaks, and the third time may see me held tight," he said to himself, as he crouched there, looking around.

He knew positively that the anxious sophomores were hiding everywhere about, their eyes on the barn where the freshmen had vanished, bearing their dinner with them. How to creep away undetected was a question for the lad to solve. He found where the darkness lay most heavily, and laid out his line of retreat accordingly.

He was just about to rise when he thought he had crept far enough away, when he heard a fluttering of the bushes near by.

"Are the birds all in the coop?" asked an unseen crouching figure.

Ralph knew that he had been taken for one of the second year boys. His ready wit came to the front, so that he instantly replied:

"Yes. And the captain wants you all to creep in

closer. I'm rounding the gang up. Move along!"

He came near laughing aloud to see not one, but three shadowy forms crawling off in the direction of the barn, and leaving the path free for the escaping freshman.

"Ta! ta! and many thanks!" whispered Ralph, as he waved a hand after the last of these figures.

Then he started away, and it must be a pretty clever sprinter who could overtake him now, once he made a break. In several directions he heard low voices calling, as though the hidden sophomores wondered who it could be running along the road. But there was no pursuit made, for which the already weary Ralph felt glad.

He had gone through with a tremendous amount of mental and physical strain that day, and had no desire to continue with another series of adventures.

So he presently arrived in the near vicinity of the cabin home of Sam Smalling.

"There's a light in the window," he muttered, as he drew near; "and that looks as if he expected me."

Ralph was shivering, not with the cold, or even because of his double adventure that night, but with apprehension. He dreaded lest a disappointment might await him. Perhaps, after all, the story Smalling had to tell might not shed any particular light on his history.

Another thing that had begun to give him anxiety. He wondered whether he might not be the child of that same Arnold Musgrove, and that from some cause or other his father was ashamed to own him!

Bracing himself, he stepped up to the door of the humble cabin.

Hardly had he knocked before the door was opened.

"Glad to see you, Ralph. I began to think you wasn't going to turn up, it was getting so late," said the man, holding out his hand and drawing him inside.

"I was delayed on the way. Our class is giving a spread to-night, and the sophs got hold of me, making me a prisoner. I had some trouble breaking away. Then I had to go and warn the fellows so they might not be taken by surprise. But after all it isn't much after half-past eight, sir."

Ralph while speaking was looking around.

"Surprised to see me alone here? Well, to tell the truth I was ashamed to let the missus know what a mean thing I done aways back, and I got her to take all the kids and go over to stay with a neighbor to-night. The woman's sick, and my wife can make herself useful there. I wanted a clear field, because I've got something to say I'm mighty much ashamed of," said Smalling, slowly.

"Before you tell me anything I think I ought to

let you know what's happened to me since I met you this afternoon."

So saying, Ralph rapidly narrated what the New York lawyer had told him. The man listened eagerly, though his manner was rather moody.

"Yes," he said as Ralph finished, "it all seems to agree with what I know, only I wasn't so sure about them names. The man called himself Andrew Jackson when he hired me to help him out years back. Money tempted me; and besides, at that time I hadn't met the woman that helped me get the better of my drink habit. Mind, I ain't makin' excuses for what I done. It was a low game, and I've often thought about it since, wondering what had come of the baby I helped kidnap!"

"Oh!"

Ralph could not keep back that one exclamation. It seemed to him that he must either be dreaming, or else deep in some romance. That these matters were connected with his own life seemed bordering on an absurdity.

"You must be about fourteen now, Ralph, I judge. It was nigh that time back that I fell in with a gentleman who seemed to have plenty of money, and wanted some one to help him play a little game. As I said, at that time I was drinking hard, and conscience seldom bothered me; so I joined forces with him, and together we did the business.

"He brought the baby to me in the night. It was a boy about three months old, and even if he had dressed it in ragged and dirty clothes, I knew that it must have come from some family away up in life. It had the looks of an aristocrat.

"I obeyed orders, and carried that kid far away from New York. Up here in the country I left it in charge of an old woman for a month. That was to wait till all the hue and cry had died out, you see, and was according to my orders. Then I took the baby and left him at the poorhouse door!"

Again Ralph sighed. It seemed to him that he was in a trance. Smalling had allowed his head to fall forward upon his chest, as though he could hardly bear to look into the eyes of the lad he had injured so deeply.

"Oh! please go on! How did you know that I was taken by the Wests, and called Ralph? Tell me everything—I must know all, now!" pleaded the boy, with his voice quivering.

Smalling looked up.

"I'm going to tell everything now, Ralph, because I'm sorry I ever had a hand in this game. I can see now what that scoundrel was after, and how he used me as a tool. Even if I go to jail for it, I'm going to tell the truth!"

He brought his fist down upon his knee as he spoke in this manner.

"Three years afterward I just chanced to be up in these parts again for a little stay. To tell you the ugly truth, I was hiding from the police at that time. While here I remembered about that kid, and asked a few cautious questions. In that way I learned that the Wests had adopted you, and that they called you Ralph. And when I heard that they were a good family, and would treat you white, why, I just kinder let the thing slip out of my mind, believing that you'd be happy without ever knowing that they wasn't your real parents.

"I admit that more'n once I tried to find that gent. Them times was when I was hard up and thought I might threaten him into giving me some more coin. But he seemed to have covered his tracks too well for me. I reckon I hunted New York all over thinking to see him, but it was no go. Now I suppose it was because he kept on the other side of the ocean most of the time."

"Then you remember what he looked like, do you?" asked Ralph, eagerly.

At this Sam Smalling chuckled.

"It's better than that, my boy, far better. I've got a picture of my benevolent employer, took in the queerest way you ever heard of."

He drew out an old pocketbook, and rummaging through this found a small piece of cardboard which he handed to the boy.

Ralph uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

The photograph was weak, having either faded from age, or else because of insufficient light at the time of taking; but it was easy to distinguish in one of the two figures a man who much resembled Sam Smalling.

"Why, isn't this you?" demanded Ralph.

"No other. And that chap standing there is Mr. Andrew Jackson, as he called himself, which I believe is the same as Mr. Arnold Musgrove," replied the man.

"But what is he handing you—that bundle?" gasped the boy, suspecting the truth.

"That was *you,* Ralph, the poor little baby that he wanted to have disappear! Yes, this picture was taken at just the minute he gave you to me. You wonder how that could ever happen, and I'll tell you. I was bunking at the time with a drunken photographer, and he knew what I was going to do. It was his suggestion that he try and get a picture of the man of money. I remember we had a hazy notion that it might help us to get money out of the chap later on."

"And he managed it, then?" asked Ralph, wonderingly; for flashlights were hardly in use so far back, and this picture showed no signs of having been taken in that fashion.

"He did, though I don't know how. The click

of the machine startled my employer, and he came near dropping the baby; but I told him it was a window creaking upstairs in the old building, and he believed it. But after all the picture never did either of us any good, for I never could find Mr. Jackson again to ask a loan on the strength of it," and the man laughed disdainfully.

"But now the picture promises to come in valuable to me. Oh! will you please let me have it to give to Mr. Allen, who is going to carry my case out for me?"

"Certain I will. And, Ralph, though it may cost me dear I stand ready to testify to my part in this here rascally game when the time comes. I give you my word on that, lad, come what will," said Sam Smalling, resolutely.

Ralph squeezed his hand when he replied.

"Perhaps it may not be necessary at all. I promise you that you will not be brought into the matter if it can be helped; and Judge Allen will find a way, with this picture to help out, I'm sure. Oh! I wonder how that man could have been so cruel. And do you really think that his sister, this widow, Mrs. Langworthy, can be—*my mother.*"

"That's what it seems like, and you can make up your mind to it, money was at the bottom of his game when he stole you and had me take you away. Sounds like a story out of the books, but I guess

people to-day ain't a bit different from old times."

"I'm glad I came here to-night; and, Mr. Smalling, after what you've said and done don't think I'm going to hold it against you. I'm too happy myself to want to make anybody suffer. And later on I expect to drop in here to see you again, you and little Mary," said the boy, rising to go, for he was now just as anxious to see and consult with Judge Allen as he had been to reach Sam Smalling's home.

"I'll expect you, Ralph. I'm glad this happened as it did. It's just Fate, that's what! But the best of luck go with you, lad; and remember to call on me if there's any hitch to the game. Good night, Ralph, good night."

CHAPTER XXII

A PLAIN TALK WITH BILL KLEMM

"THERE, what do you think of it, Frank?"

Ralph sat back in a chair in his friend's den, and waited to hear the decision of the one in whose opinion he had such faith.

"It seems as clear as print to me, and I'm tickled nearly to death at the way things are turning out. It was mighty nice in you coming here to-night on the way home, and relieving my anxiety," said the other, vigorously wringing the hand of his visitor.

"But I had a double motive. I hoped to see your Uncle Jim, and now you tell me he's away for the night—gone with your father to see a sick friend over the mountain, and won't be back until morning. But what do you make of all this strange story?"

"That pretended Mr. Andrew Jackson is, of course, Arnold Musgrove. And you are the baby he turned over to Sam Smalling years ago. This picture is what will clinch matters, if he puts up any denial. As to just who you are, I have strong suspicions, I must say," returned Frank.

Then he wrote something on paper and thrust it before Ralph.

"How would you like to start out fresh under that name, eh?"

"Jack Langworthy!" read Ralph, and then threw himself suddenly forward so that his arms clasped Frank around the neck.

Nature had given way. So long had he been fighting to hold in his emotions that he could control himself no longer.

"I know I'm a fool and a baby to do this, but it just seemed as though something broke loose and swamped me," he said, finally, as he wiped the moisture from his eyes, and tried to smile in Frank's face.

"I don't blame you a bit. In fact, I think you've done bully to hold in so long. And then the strain of that game to-day was enough alone to knock the props out from under any fellow. But cheer up, Ralph! It's going to be all right now, for the sky has brightened, and I bet a cookey you find a loving mother inside another month. Just think of it, will you? Hurrah! But I say, it'll take an everlasting long time to learn to say Langworthy instead of West; for it's a big mouthful."

Ralph felt better after that.

"I'll be around to-morrow without fail to talk it all over with your uncle. Please don't let him know

anything about it until I come. I'd like to be the one to tell him the story, Frank."

"I'm mum on that score. But I wonder if those sophs succeeded in stealing the spread of the freshmen, or were they kept out of the barn by main force? You've got some husky chaps in your class this year, and they could give a good account of themselves in a scrap. But Helen will tell me later," laughed Frank, as his comrade started for the door.

Ralph was really quite exhausted, and knew that he must get home and to bed. The tremendous strain of that strenuous day was indeed telling on him.

It was well on to midnight before voices outside announced that the freshmen had returned from the country. Helen came in, her face aglow with excitement, to tell what a tremendous scuffle had followed the attempt of the sophomores to break in and spoil the spread.

"But our boys put them out all right, Frank! Oh, it was a tremendous time. Perhaps some of us girls were in the scrimmage, too, for I know I found this cap in my hand when it was all over," and she laughingly held up a boy's headgear, decorated with the ribbon of the second class, as well as the purple and gold of Columbia.

And that was all Frank could coax her to tell. He could look back to several similar experiences in his own school life, and appreciate what it meant

to these freshmen, for Frank was a junior now.

In the morning Frank sauntered around to a certain modest house in town, where he greeted a young fellow by the name of Gabe Brown. Gabe was in the store which Frank's father ran, known as the department store of Columbia. Moreover, he had charge of a certain counter in which Frank was somewhat interested just then.

"Hello, Gabe!" he said, as the other looked surprised at seeing the son of his employer look up on Sunday morning, "just wanted to get a little information from you. Here's a new bandana handkerchief I picked up yesterday. Some fellow dropped it out at the baseball grounds, and I'd like to find out who he is. Can you help me?"

Gabe took the article, and examined it.

"Came from our place, didn't it?" continued Frank, seeing his smile.

"It sure did, and I think I know whose it is, Frank," replied the salesman.

"How could you be sure? Lots of these are sold every season."

"Well, you notice that it's just about new, and never been washed, for the stiffening is in it still. That shows it was bought recently, don't it?" asked Gabe.

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Frank, for this was just what he himself had in mind all along.

"Well, we ran out of these a week back, and ordered more. They got in Friday evening, and I sold just one yesterday. They're different in design from our old ones, too. See the point?" said Gabe, triumphantly.

"Sure. Who bought that one, now?"

"Mr. William Klemm, Jr.," came the expected response.

"Thanks; I thought so," and Frank turned away, leaving Gabe looking after him and muttering:

"I reckon something's going to happen close to Billy Klemm just about now."

Frank saw the object of his solicitude on the street in front of a vacant lot. Bill had slipped out to meet one of his cronies on the sly, and perhaps puff a cigarette in the cool of that Sunday morning.

"Morning, Bill. Lost something yesterday, didn't you?" and Frank held up the red bandana.

Bill started to put out his hand, and then drew it cautiously back, as though he might have scented a trap.

"Naw, ain't got any bandany rag. Belongs to some other fellow. What made you reckon I owned it?" he said, suspiciously.

"Because Gabe Brown says he sold you this particular one from a new lot that just came in, and different from the old ones. You were in a hurry to

jump yesterday, Bill, when that bull started for the hole in the fence!"

Bill shut his teeth hard and looked as if about to hotly deny that he knew anything about that matter.

"Better go slow, Bill, or I might be tempted to step around and tell your dad a few things. Keep going with Lef Seller, and you'll bring up in the lockup sooner or later. And, Bill, it's a lucky thing for you that no one was seriously hurt yesterday when you let that savage beast in on the crowd. If there had been, I'd see to it that you were made to pay the piper."

The awkward fellow looked frightened, and let his head drop on his chest.

" 'Twas only a joke," he mumbled, "but some fellers they never see anything funny."

"Not when the joke endangers human life, and there were lots of kids around in the ball-grounds. Here, take the bandana, and stop pulling chestnuts out of the fire for Lef Seller, just like the cat did for the monkey."

Bill finally accepted the handkerchief, and tried to put a bold face on the matter, saying:

"Guess if anything, the old bull he's got a right to kick, 'cause he near had the life pounded out of him with them bats. It's white of you not to peep, Frank. I reckon I'll take your advice, and cut Lef out."

But Frank was not deceived. He knew the kind of fellow Bill was, and that there would be a very small chance of reforming his ways.

"Yes," Frank was musing to himself as he walked away, "they say there was a certain old gentleman with horns and cloven hoofs who, when he was sick, sighed to be a saint; but when he got well was he? Not any! And Bill Klemm only feels sorry when he thinks he's in for a licking at home, or in school."

When Mr. Allen and Uncle Jim returned, Ralph was on hand. He and the lawyer went "into executive session," as the latter laughingly said, and remained in the library for a full hour.

"He's going to fix it for me," declared Ralph, later on, as he and Frank walked down the road together.

"Then he thought it a clear case, did he?" asked his chum, eagerly.

"So much so that he says he will start across to Italy in a week, after his big case is over with, and see the lady himself," replied Ralph, promptly.

"Bully for Uncle Jim! Didn't I tell you he was game. But what does he do that for, when he could cable?"

"He's a lawyer, and cautious. Besides, he says, and it looks good to me, that a man who could steal a baby away from his sister for the sake of gain, wouldn't be above opening her mail, or even reading

a cablegram. It might put him on his guard, and spoil things. And so he's going himself. Oh, Frank, that will be a long month to me!"

"But with such happiness coming you can stand it. Think of the past, and how different things look now. Ralph, old chap, I'm sure glad it's happening this way. Besides, it'll give a fellow a chance to repeat that name Langworthy a few times to myself, so as to kind of get used to it."

"Don't be too dead sure," remarked Ralph. "You know the old saying, there's many a slip between the cup and the lip. But I'm glad you say your arm is getting on nicely, for you've just got to pitch next Saturday, and pull old Columbia through to glory."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN CODDLING WEAKENED

CRASH!

"Wow! Look at that ball go, will you?"

"And two men on bases! Here's where we climb all over poor old Columbia!"

"What's the score now?"

"Seven to five, and this makes it——"

"Hold on, there; you're counting your chickens before they're hatched. Did you notice that reliable old Jack Comfort got under that screamer, and tagged it? And if you look sharp enough, Bellport, you'll see two husky lads tearing back to try and make their bases before the ball comes; but it's no go! There, Seymour has it on his man, and watch him send the ball to Lanky! All out! Set 'em up in the other alley, boys!"

Such a frightful noise as followed this splendid play on the part of the club that was coming up from behind. What with Herman Hooker and his squad of howlers, megaphone and all, together with a

thousand other brazen-throated shouters, it really seemed as though the very earth trembled.

It was the ending of the seventh inning. The game was being played in Bellport, since they had been fortunate enough to win the toss. That was the first sign of luck in their favor. Besides, everybody knew that Frank Allen was still somewhat handicapped by his accident, though he had the grit to continue in the box as long as Captain Seymour wished.

At one time the score had been seven to three, so that as the game progressed it began to seem that the Columbia High boys were climbing. They had had their little juggle, in which every man nearly did something foolish, and runs piled in; after which they had settled down to serious business.

"They're creeping up, boys, creeping up!" shouted Herman, encouragingly.

"Sure they are, and if the game only lasts ten hours more it looks like Columbia might come in neck and neck with Bellport," jeered one of the mill workers.

Watkins Gould was about, and evidently making wagers, although he did not dare show the color of his money. There was more or less talk about finding some means of keeping him out, since he had been known to try and influence a player to do some underhand work and throw a game.

The eighth inning began.

Seymour had been encouraging his men to make a break and do some consecutive batting that would count.

"We only need two runs to tie, three to win, fellows. Somebody jump on first, and then the rest of us get busy with our little bats!" he was saying, as his men came hustling in from the field to the bench.

"Batter up!" called the umpire.

"That means me," sang out Ben Allison, as he stepped forward to the plate.

Coddling looked unusually savage. The fact of the matter was he knew that these boys of Columbia were rapidly getting on to his curves. The last inning they had hit him freely, and seemed ready to take up the good work again right now.

When that feeling pinches at the door of a pitcher's heart, he is going to hurt himself trying to excel. Coddling's one great mainstay had been his coolness under any and all conditions; and when he allowed himself to show signs of anger he not only injured his chances, but gave encouragement to the enemy.

Ben could always hit the Bellport pitcher. If he got on first there were other dangerous batters to follow. Just then they looked like real giants to Coddling; and yet at another time he had smiled disdainfully at the same fellows, and with coolness struck them out in succession.

Allison was a good waiter usually. To-day he took toll of the very first ball that the Bellport pitcher sent twisting on its way. When a team gets in its stride, and is hitting with perfect confidence, all balls seem to look alike to them, and it is next to impossible to keep the sphere out of their reach.

"That's the way, fellows! Here's Ben waiting for his ticket around the course. Bones, push him along, will you?" shouted Herman Hooker through his megaphone.

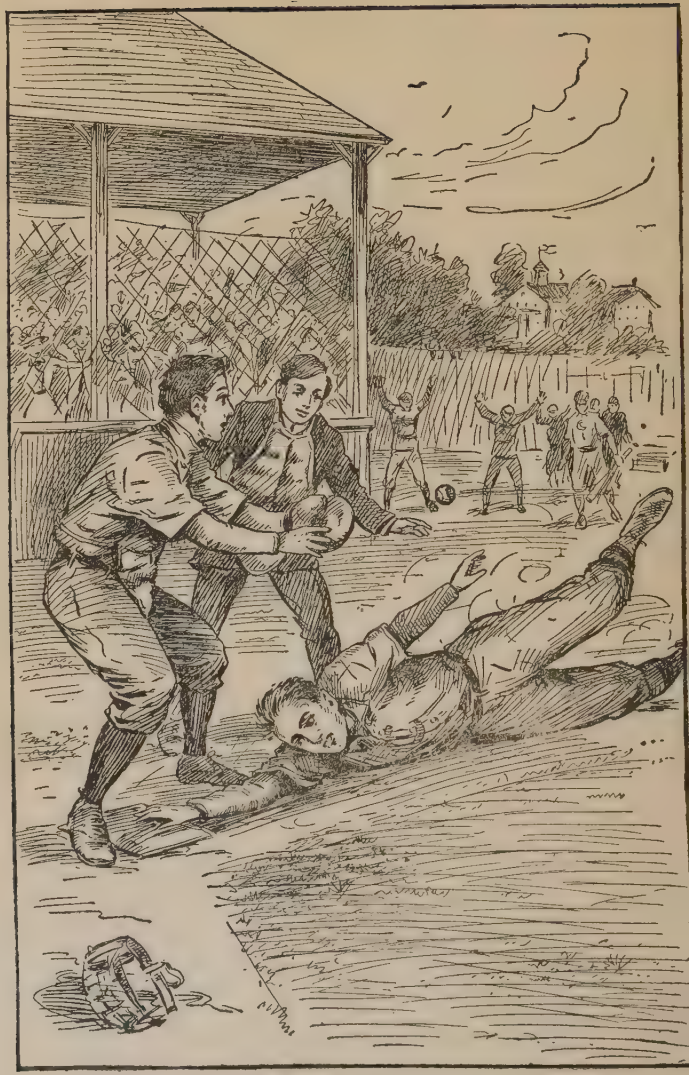
Just as if he were taking his orders from that source, what did Shadduck do but lay down the most beautiful little bunt imaginable, right along the line, but keeping well within bounds.

"Go it, you heifer!" shouted the bleachers.

Bones never got to first, but there was a grin on his freckled face as he turned aside and retraced his steps, for he had landed his comrade on second, and that was what he had been instructed by Captain Seymour to do.

Then up stepped Jack Comfort. It looked as though he meant to duplicate the performance of Bones, for he made a stab at the first ball. But that was only in the line of a trick with Jack. All the while he was picking out just where he could swipe the next ball that came along.

As the bat and ball came together with a vicious smash, there burst from the frantic crowd a howl



BEN MADE A GALLANT SLIDE FOR HOME.

such as had never before been heard on those Bellport grounds.

"Run, Jack, run! Go it, Ben, you slow-coach. Hurry! the ball's after you!"

Ben made a gallant slide for home, though there was hardly any necessity for it. Still, he believed in making sure; and the ball did plunk in the catcher's mitt even as his hand fell on the plate.

"One run!"

"A man on second, and only one out!"

"Keep it going, you tigers. You've got Coddling's measure all right. Put the Indian sign on him! Give us another cheer, Herman!"

"All together, then, and with a whirl! Here you go, now! Ho! ho! ho! hi! hi! hi! *veni! vidi! vici!* Columbia! Siss! boom! ay!"

Herman and his cohort could not sit through such excitement as this. They had left the bleachers and were jumping up and down like a group of wild Indians, waving their arms, dancing in a circle, and shrieking until every mother's son gave promise of being as hoarse as a crow on the morrow.

If noise could coax Columbia to win this up-hill game, there was certainly every inducement in the world for them to accomplish that task.

Lanky Wallace to the bat. Lanky had not distinguished himself overly much thus far during the day.

"He's due for a hit, fellows, mark me!" cried one enthusiast, and Lanky heard, for he grinned and nodded, as if he felt it in his bones.

Coddling was wabbling by now. He had weakened in the great strain. Somehow he believed in his soul that Lanky had it in for him, and actually began to toss wide ones, having less fear of the next two batters. But Lanky was indignant, and did not mean to be cheated of his prey. If the mountain refused to come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain.

"Step out and take one, Lanky, old boy!"

"Don't you dare let him pass you! He's tricky, all right, and he knows you can swat it! Oblige us, Lanky, please!"

Lanky evidently could not find it in his heart to refuse such pleading. And he "swatted it" so very hard that Smith, Jr., had to run like a deer to keep the long-legged first baseman from making a clean sweep of the bases.

The score tied, and a man on third, with only one out!

Imagine the racket that ensued. Men began to shake hands with each other in their intense emotional excitement, that is, men who owned to a partiality for Columbia. As for the good people of Bellport, they cheered in a faint way, feeling the

strain, but not exactly liking the way things were going against them.

"Now, Buster, *you* know! Pick out a good one, and send it over the fence!"

Buster wanted to do just that. It would have pleased him immensely to have been the one to bat in the run needed to lead the score, and possibly win the game.

But he was over anxious, or else Coddling got a new grip on himself; for Buster ingloriously struck out. A groan went up from the Columbia High partisans, for they had been indulging in hopes that the wonderful Coddling had gone to pieces.

Tom Budd stepped up to try his luck. He had been responsible for one of the earlier runs in the game, and there was hope that he could connect with a twister, just as before.

When the smack of the bat announced that he had, a shout started to break loose; but it instantly degenerated into a groan, followed by whoops from the Bellport adherents. For Tom Budd had knocked up a soaring foul that dropped into the big mitt of Clay, and was smothered there.

During their half of the eighth the Bellport boys went out one, two, three.

So the ninth inning opened.

Once again the Columbias had a chance to distinguish themselves. Seymour himself started

things moving this time with a hot one that stung the hands of Herbert Lacy at short, so that he fumbled it, and the runner just reached the bag in time to be called safe, though it was a close call.

Paul Bird knew that it was his part of the play to advance the runner a base. He waited carefully while Coddling took his time and recovered his wind. Then Paul tapped a bunt close to the plate. Clay, in his eagerness to handle it, fought the ball. It was just about two seconds, but he saw he had lost his man at second, and had to hustle hard to get Paul at first.

Was this inning to be a repetition of the last one? everybody sat up and seemed to be holding their breath in suspense. Everything depended on what Frank Allen could do, when a hit might mean the game.

Frank tried to calm his nerves as he stepped into the batter's position and gave a reassuring glance toward the grandstand, where he knew full well a pretty girl was waving her little flag, and praying in her heart that he would win his own game with the single hit that was needed at this critical point.

Coddling was winding up preparatory to throwing, when Frank received a signal from Captain Seymour at second that told him to wait. He knew what that meant, and that the fleetfooted Columbia

man was about to get enough of a lead to steal third.

With Clay behind the bat, that was indeed a risky thing to attempt; but no one was apparently expecting such a move, and in that it stood a chance for succeeding.

CHAPTER XXIV

WINNING AN UP-HILL GAME

Just at that moment there was such a dreadful clamor all over the field that hearing any note of warning was utterly out of the question. The Columbia cheer captain had started in again with his corps, and what they did to rend the atmosphere with their racket was wonderful.

Coddling knew from the hasty gesture of the catcher that something was going on; but he had wound up for a throw, and could not hold back without a balk. The best he could do was to send it in direct to Clay's hands, in order to give the other a fair chance to throw to third, so as to catch the purloiner of sacks.

Of course, Frank made a wild sweep at the ball. That was a part of the game, to help disconcert the catcher. Clay stopped the ball successfully, but it came at such an angle that he was not in exact position to hurl the sphere to third.

A second counts for considerable at times in baseball. Seymour slid like a Western avalanche. His extended fingers touched the base just as Bardwell grabbed the spinning ball, and dropped to touch him.

The umpire extended both hands. That meant, of course, the runner was safe, and a shriek went up from that immense crowd.

Now Frank faced Coddling again. Only a nice little base hit was needed to bring the runner home. Would the Columbia pitcher be equal to the call, or must trusty old Ben Allison be delegated to the task?

Frank struck! The "smack" electrified every heart in that great throng!

Far away out over the center field soared the ball, and several thousand eyes followed its flight. Every player knew that the thing had been done, although there was Tony Banghardt chasing wildly to get out far enough to hold the ball.

"He'll get it! Not this time, Columbia! Tony's going to hold that balloon!" howled a half-crazy Bellport backer, as he stretched his neck to watch.

"You've got another guess coming, old fellow. What will the man on third be doing all that time eh?" jeered a Columbia student.

Banghardt did get under. He made a magnificent catch, and held the ball, even though he rolled over twice in so doing. But Seymour had shot from the

third bag the very second the ball fell. He was racing like a wild broncho for home as Tony rolled about in the field. And by the time the Bellport player managed to regain his feet to hold up the ball, a run had crossed the plate for the visitors!

Again and again did Herman Hooker lead his demonstrative band around. They howled, they cheered, they shrieked; and those who had lost control of their voices jumped up and down like dancing dervishes.

Columbia was a run to the good!

Allison went out, shortstop to first. Then came the Bellports to the bat, grim and determined, with Lee first to the plate, and ready to smash the ball over the fence. Frank felt his lame arm troubling him, but he set his teeth hard. He must hold out now to the end. This game meant everything to Columbia High, and he was determined not to lose it, if such a disaster could be avoided.

And every other man on the team felt just the same way. When Lee did go after an outshoot, and give it a frightful crack, the crowd uttered an involuntary "oh!" and then followed it with a tumultuous burst of cheering. It was that acrobatic shortstop, Tom Budd, who became responsible for this mad applause; for he had thrown himself to one side, made a stab for the speedy passing ball, turned a complete somersault, and upon landing on

his feet shot the sphere at Lanky on first in plenty of time to head off the runner.

Banghardt came next. The Bellports died hard, and Tony might have followed up his brilliant catch with a hard hit, only he was short of breath. Consequently after knocking two wicked fouls, the umpire decided that he had allowed another good one to pass over the plate. So Tony was invited to retire.

Smith, Jr., appeared as the last hope. Already were the players beginning to put their bats away in the bags, as though the game might be reckoned as good as over. Frank never faltered a particle. This man was just as dangerous as though a dozen came after him. There must be no let-up in speed or curves; for many a game apparently won has gone the other way through over-confidence.

Three times did Smith sweep the air without discovering until too late that he had bitten at deceivers. Then a roar broke out that dwarfed all previous noises!

The game belonged to Columbia High! It meant that the coveted pennant of the Tri-School League belonged to Columbia High for this season!

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

THAT night a crowd gathered in the big assembly room of the Columbia High School to see Roderic Seymour and his gallant boys receive the splendid flag which the girls of Columbia High had purchased to fly upon the staff at the athletic grounds whenever a game of any sort was in progress.

Helen Allen had been chosen to make the presentation address, because she was known to be the best speaker among Columbia's fair ones. And both Paul Bird and Ralph West thought her the prettiest girl in the wide world as, with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, she told what pride the sisters of the Columbia boys took in their sterling fight for the baseball pennant.

If there was one disgruntled fellow in that big hall it must have been Lef Seller, who had seen so many of his schemes for getting even with his rival, Frank Allen, go astray of late. He had come because somehow he could not keep away; but during

the exercises, while everybody else seemed to be filled with delight, Lef could only grit his teeth, and mutter low threats to himself, still cherishing the hope that the day would come when fortune might once more shine upon him, to the confusion of his enemies.

Although the school term was nearly ended that seemed to be no reason for Columbia High losing all interest in outdoor sports. There were other days to come, and that not far distant, when these sturdy lads of the banner high school would meet again in friendly struggles with their student rivals of Bellport and Clifford. Something of the nature of these contests may be gleaned from the title of the next volume in this series, to be called, "The Boys of Columbia High on the River; or, The Boat Race Plot That Failed." It will be found crammed full of the further doings of these wideawake lads, in whose fortunes we have found ourselves so deeply concerned.

While the yearly examinations were being conducted as usual, Ralph found it exceedingly difficult to concentrate his mind on his work. He knew that Judge Allen had taken passage for Europe, in order to follow up the mysterious travelers, who had last been heard from in Italy.

So the school year closed in a blaze of glory. Principal Parke declared they had never known a

more successful season, and with the percentage so high. The graduation exercises passed off without a hitch; nor was the electric current cut off on this occasion, as had happened once before, when mischief-makers severed the wires, and lamps had to be brought in so that Lanky Wallace could complete his declamation.

Ralph was frequently in consultation with his good friend Frank, while he waited to hear from abroad.

"What would I do without you, Frank?" he said, as they sat under the apple tree on that July morning just a day or two before the Glorious Fourth.

"Oh, you'd manage to get on all right," returned the other, quickly. "Cheer up, old fellow. It's always darkest just before dawn. You'll get a letter any day now, and perhaps written by the one you are longing to hear from most. Try and put it out of your mind for a bit, and think of the great times we expect to have on the river."

"That's always the way with you, Frank. You manage to chase away the blues better than any medicine made. I'm going to laugh, and try to forget my troubles for a little while. Yes, the letter is on the way now, I don't doubt; but oh! how the days drag along, waiting for news," sighed Ralph.

"Here comes Helen. Now we'll go inside and have her give us some music that is bound to liven

us up. I just feel like singing, and it will do you good," cried Frank.

Ralph was nothing loath. There was an attraction about Frank's charming sister that always appealed to the homeless lad. So they were soon gathered about the piano, and joining voices in such old favorites as "Tenting To-night," "I Know a Bank," "Upidee," and many others.

"Now, let's wind up with the 'Red, White and Blue,' " said Frank, when Ralph had declared he must be going.

So, as on many a hard fought athletic field, the familiar words of the grand old tune rolled out—always a favorite with these students of the famous high school bearing the same cherished name:

"O, Columbia, the gem of the ocean,
The home of the brave and the free,
The shrine of each patriot's devotion,
A world offers homage to thee!"

THE END

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